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CAREER TRANSFORMATION

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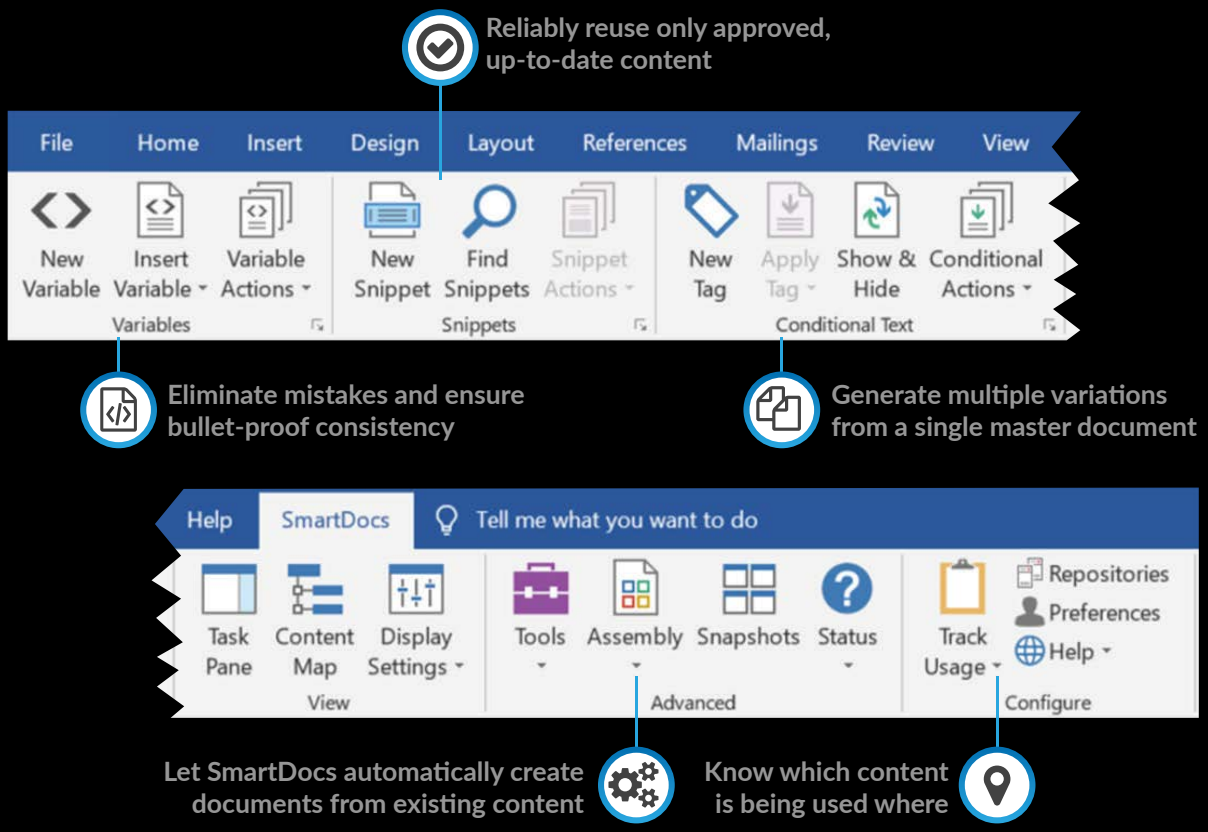

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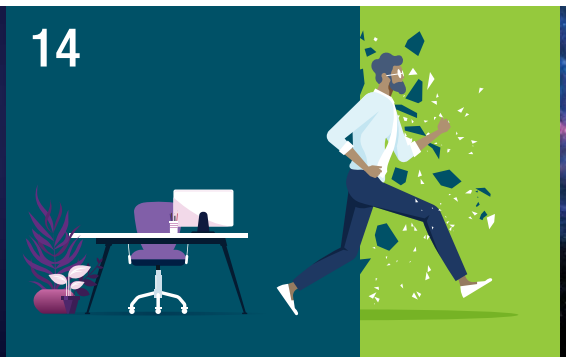

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A Note from the Editor

WHEN YOU HEAR the phrase "career transitions," what comes to mind? For many, it means looking for a new job at a new company, leaving a company to start freelancing, or giving up freelancing to take a staff position. For some, it might mean consciously expanding an existing role, moving to a related position, or getting promoted—all within the same organization. For others, it could mean doing the same job, but rebranding it or repositioning yourself to better align with management expectations or the industry. "Transition" and "career" are broad terms that cover a lot of territory.

Now, what do you *feel* when you hear the phrase "career transitions?" Excitement at the prospect of learning something new? Fear of downsizing and layoffs? Dread, because you've tried every job title and elevator pitch in the book, but your executives *still* don't understand what you do?

Personally, I view career transitions as an ongoing process and journey rather than a point in time or periodic event. By thinking of it that way, over the years, I've put together a system of thought and action that has helped me to:

- Position and reposition what I do, as needed, to ensure that my "bosses" understand what I do in the most valuable and impactful light
- Leverage opportunities—see them, make them happen, and make decisions about whether they are advantageous for me "right now"
- Grow my responsibilities and roles to increase my impact
- Build new skills, try out new things, and constantly learn
- Focus on using my strengths—rather than shoring up my deficiencies—to derive the most joy and satisfaction from my career over many years, many roles, and many jobs

If you had a single, specific thought or feeling when answering the questions above, I encourage you to think about career transitions in a new, broader way. I offer to you the perspective that you are in transition; now, what will you do with the opportunity that affords you?

Regardless of your current phase in that journey—whether you're completely satisfied with your current role, you'd like to spice it up with some new skills, or you're ready to move into a completely new aspect of technical communication—this issue has something for you!

First up, Yehoshua Paul demonstrates in "To Boldly Go Where (Almost) No Technical Communicator Has Gone Before" that technical communication and science fiction actually have much in common by introducing five famous science fiction authors who began their careers writing and editing technical documentation.

Liz Herman reminds us in "Identity Disruption and the Technical Communicator" that we're integral to the customer experience—and that, as many sectors (like the government) are fully learning how critical the customer experience is, technical communicators have the skills to help take them to this promised land.

Nithya Krishnan explores the concept of topping out in your current role and how to instigate a change to revitalize your outlook on your job—and deliver value to your organization—in "Career Transitions:

When 'Having Enough' Just Isn't Good Enough."

Finally, in "Career Path Crossover: Designing Visual Documentation" Sara Stein provides an in-depth analysis of what it looks like to delve into the visual side of documentation as part of a well-rounded technical communication career—including an extensive example of what the deliverables of that kind of work might look like.

As always, we have a great column lineup for you, as well:

- Michelle Corbin takes us down the rabbit hole to determine whether descriptive editors are breaking "the rules" in *Editing Matters*.
- In *The Academic Conversation*, Tom Barker reminds us of Stephen King's adage, "Sooner or later, everything old is new again," and dusts off some resources that are worth remembering for their applicability today.
- Cruce Saunders describes in *Content Engineering* the many options technical communicators have to play an important role in intelligent customer experiences, including some exciting leadership opportunities.

Don't forget to visit the Society pages to get the latest and greatest information about, and happenings around, STC!

Let us know what you think about what you've read—leave a comment on the HTML version at stc.org, or send us an email. The authors and I want to know what's on your mind.

Until next time: to your wild career success!

— Andrea L. Ames
andrea@idyllpoint.com

Correction

In the March/April 2020 print edition of *Intercom,* Scott Abel was mistakenly listed as co-author of the memoriam for Paul Stanley Kennedy. Edward Malone was the sole author of the piece.

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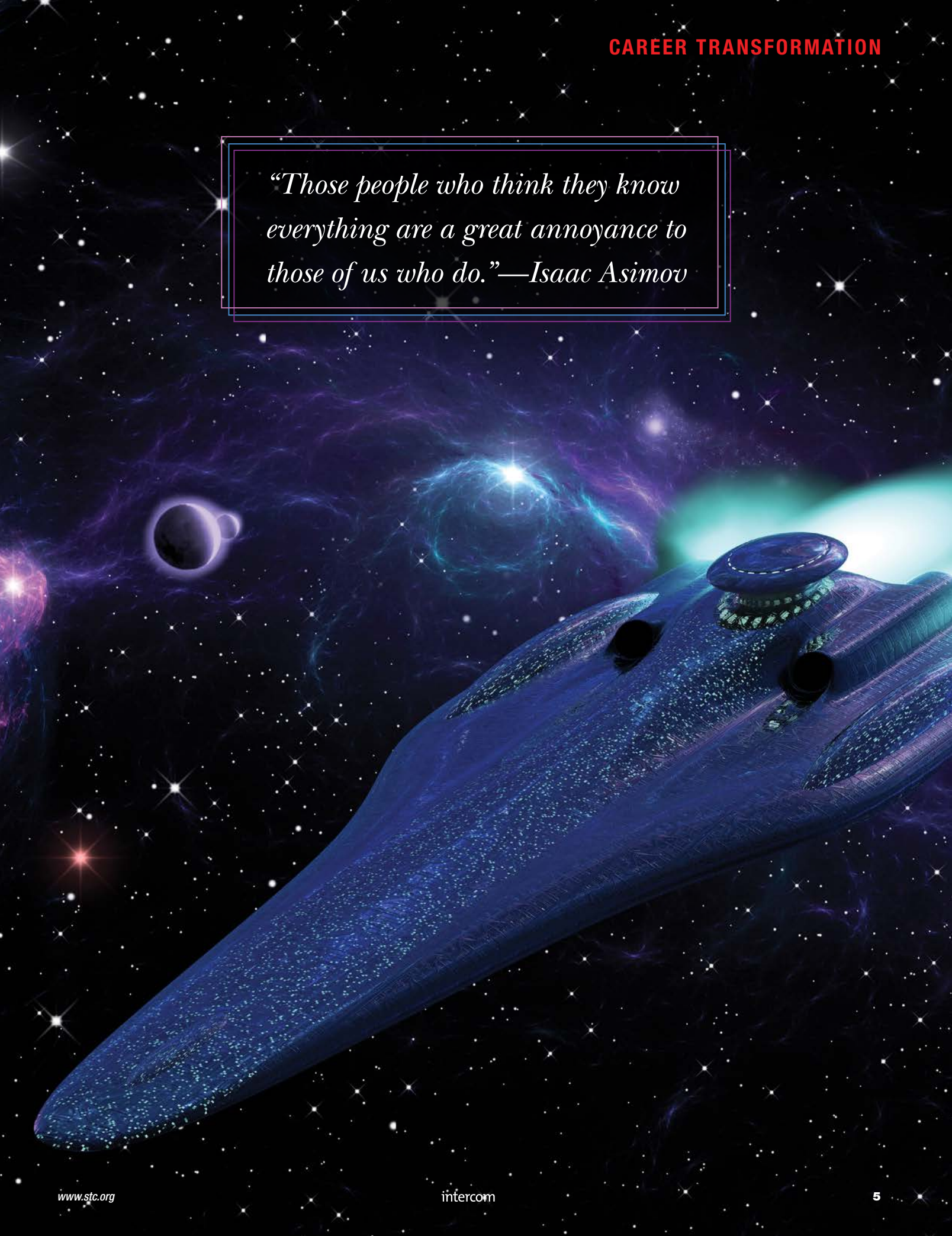
To Boldly Go Where (Almost) No Technical Communicator Has Gone Before

By YEHOSHUA PAUL

"Those people who think they know everything are a great annoyance to those of us who do."—Isaac Asimov



THERE ARE TWO types of people who know everything: technical communicators and science fiction writers. Technical communicators know how to gather all the information on a given topic, assemble it into a cohesive structure, and communicate it through a variety of channels and outputs to the appropriate target audience. Science fiction writers take things one step further by gathering their knowledge from unknown futures waiting to be documented. Both professions share a lot in common, and in fact many famous science fiction authors actually jump-started their careers using skills they learned in a documentation department.

These include the following:

- Ray Cummings, the founding father of pulp science fiction, who was also Thomas Edison's personal technical writer
- Kurt Vonnegut, author of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, who began his career as a technical writer for General Electric (GE)
- Philip José Farmer, a grandmaster of science fiction who moonlighted as a technical writer for various defense contractors
- Gene Wolfe, author of The Book of the New Sun series, who worked for many years as a senior technical editor for the *Planet Engineering* journal
- Ted Chiang, an award-winning science fiction short story writer and former technical writer for Microsoft

Science fiction and technical writing are obviously different professions, however, they both rely on a similar impulse: the desire to explain an idea clearly. It doesn't matter whether you're writing a short story for a pulp magazine or a highly technical hardware manual, you still want your readers to finish the story and complete the procedure—and then buy the product, because documentation sells! How do you think Thomas Edison sold his inventions?

Early 1900s: Ray Cummings

"Just because you don't understand, doesn't mean there is no sense to it."—Ray Cummings

Long before the age of agile, Thomas Edison was busy inventing new devices at a rapid pace. With over 1,000 patents to his name, the busy inventor needed someone capable of explaining to the masses what exactly his brilliant mind was producing. Fortunately for him, from 1914 to 1919, he had Ray Cummings as a technical writer and personal assistant.

While working for the Edison Laboratories, Cummings was responsible for editing internal communication and writing copy for the many inventions being produced. During this period, Cummings also experimented with fiction writing and managed to sell several short stories to pulp magazines such as *The All-Story*, *Argosy*, and *Weird Tales* (Figure 1).

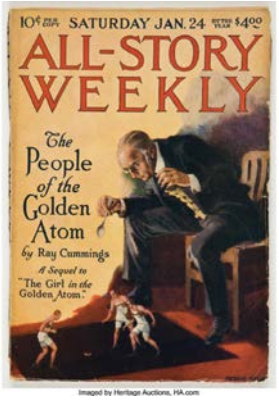
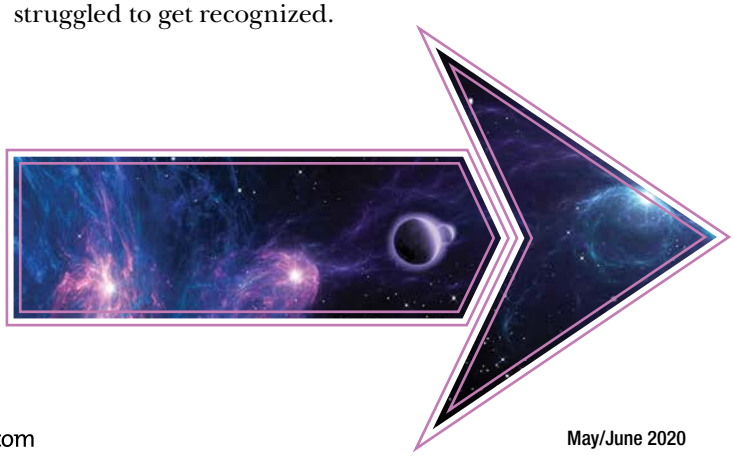


Figure 1. Ray Cummings experimented with fiction writing and sold several short stories to pulp magazines such as All-Story.

His first, and arguably best, novel was *The Girl in the Golden Atom*. Cummings originally wrote it as a two-part story, which was serialized in the pulp magazine *All-Story Weekly*. When reading the story, you can detect some hints of Cummings's technical writing origins. The characters all have roles but no names, and the science, while dubious, is explained clearly and succinctly. In my opinion, this clarity did much to contribute to the author's initial success (that, and his wild ideas).

The first part of the story was an instant success, and it enabled the budding author to leave Edison Laboratories and launch a full-time career as a professional writer. Cummings, like his mentor, produced at a very rapid pace, and by the end of his career had written roughly 750 novels and short stories under a variety of pen names (a common practice back then for pulp writers). These stories included dozens of new inventions and ideas that would later be adopted by mainstream science fiction, such as artificial gravity, lunar mining, and moon domes. However, despite his incredible output and innovative ideas, the author is still remembered primarily for his contribution to the pulp genre.

Pulp fiction, like technical writing, was a genre that was afforded little respect. Authors who sought mainstream recognition were forced to distance themselves from the cheap reputation of the magazines in which these types of stories were published. Pulp fiction, however, was also a convenient way for starving authors to make a living and was a method for gaining experience in professional writing. It was a difficult dilemma, and one with which, decades later, Kurt Vonnegut was forced to grapple as he struggled to get recognized.



The 1940s and 1950s: Kurt Vonnegut

"Newspaper reporters and technical writers are trained to reveal almost nothing about themselves in their writings. This makes them freaks in the world of writers, since almost all of the other ink-stained wretches in that world reveal a lot about themselves to readers."—Kurt Vonnegut

One of Thomas Edison's greatest legacies is GE. During the late forties and early fifties, the company began experimenting with automation—more work for fewer workers. GE employees were true believers when it came to worshipping technology. However, they also had some very real concerns about their jobs. This general atmosphere deeply affected Kurt Vonnegut, who at the time was working as a technical writer and publicist for GE's public relations department.

Vonnegut's work at GE required him to frequently interact with scientists and engineers. He would often visit his more technical colleagues to talk to them and discover what they were up to. (Sound familiar?) It was important for both documentation and PR. These visits supplied him with plenty of good stories and provided much-needed inspiration for the budding author.

In 1950, Vonnegut sold his first story, "Report on the Barnhouse Effect," to *Collier's*. Following the sale, with some coaching from the magazine's fiction editor, Vonnegut wrote another short story, "Thanasphere," which sold for $950. The money generated from these stories was enough to convince Vonnegut that he could become a writer. Therefore, in 1951 he quit GE and began writing full time—which isn't surprising, all things considered.

Vonnegut wanted to express himself. Technical writers, however, get to express only the corporate voice, using very simplified language. Then, like now, a good technical writer was invisible and undetectable, and in this respect, Vonnegut was no different from the rest of the engineers and scientists at GE—allowed to produce but not able to voice his concerns. For an author, this would be torture. Therefore, Vonnegut decided to risk everything and turn to science fiction.

After selling several short stories to various magazines, Vonnegut was able to publish his first novel, *Player Piano*, an automation dystopia that satirized his experiences working for GE (Figure 2). The novel is set in a post–World War III America in which most factory workers have been replaced by machines, and this was enough to label the novel as science fiction, despite many favorable reviews.

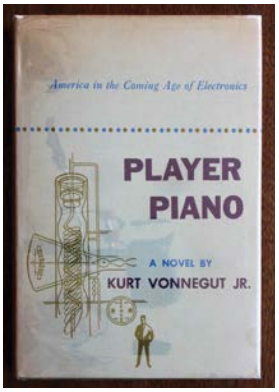


Figure 2. Kurt Vonnegut's post–World War III automation dystopia satirized his experiences working for GE.

Vonnegut did not view himself as a science fiction writer. His issue was less with the genre itself and more with how serious critics perceived it as a writing "urinal." Vonnegut wrote about technology, which was an area well outside the scope of most mainstream authors. Therefore, they perceived his writing as a fantasy of the future and not a satire of the present. Unfortunately for the struggling author, he still needed to make a living, and this meant continuing to write what sold, even if it was going to be perceived as science fiction. Fortunately, by the sixties, the attitude had changed, and Vonnegut was eventually able to gain the recognition he had more than earned.

The 1950s and 1960s: Philip José Farmer

"Dullard: Someone who looks up a thing in the encyclopedia, turns directly to the entry, reads it, and then closes the book."—Philip José Farmer

The 1960s was the era of the New Wave of science fiction, a period in which the genre experienced many changes, including:

- Experimental writing that affected both form and content
- Greater focus on the "softer" sciences of sociology and psychology
- Less concern over scientific accuracy
- Literary and artistic sensibilities

These changes helped make science fiction much more relatable to mainstream critics, who were no longer required to understand chemistry and physics. They also gave a much-needed boost to Philip José Farmer, a struggling science fiction author who moonlighted as a technical writer while working hard to support his family.

Farmer was a pioneer when it came to sexual and religious themes. His first short story, "The Lovers"—which featured a sexual relationship between a human and an alien—was rejected twice before being published in the August 1952 issue of *Startling Stories* (Figure 3). The story was immediately popular, and in 1953 Farmer won a Hugo Award for Best New Writer. This first-time success was enough to convince him to quit his job and

become a full-time writer. He entered a publisher's contest and won the $4,000 first prize for his novel, *Owe for the Flesh*—then got to experience firsthand what happens to writers who don't get paid. After going bankrupt and selling his house, Farmer resumed work—as a technical writer.

Figure 3. Philip José Farmer's first short story, "The Lovers," was rejected twice before being published in Startling Stories.

Between 1956 and 1969, Farmer worked as a technical writer for various defense contractors: GE, Motorola's military electronics division, and McDonnell-Douglas. He was also forced to move his family several times—from New York to Arizona to Michigan—until they eventually ended up in Los Angeles, California. All the while, Farmer continued writing and slowly establishing his reputation.

The fifties eventually gave way to the sixties, and with the new decade came the Beatles, hippies, the sexual revolution, *Star Trek*, and a new audience that could enable Farmer to live long and prosper as a science fiction author. The New Wave of science fiction allowed Farmer to:

- Expand "The Lovers" into a full-length novel
- Write and publish *The Maker of Universes*, the first book in his World of Tiers series
- Transform a rejected *Star Trek* script into a short story, "The Shadow of Space"
- Win a Hugo Award for Best Novella for *Riders of the Purple Wage*

In 1969, just before the United States landed its first men on the moon, McDonnell-Douglas decided to lay off a large portion of its workforce. Farmer by this point was more than popular. He quit moonlighting as a technical writer and resumed full-time writing—successfully! As a result, fans everywhere got to enjoy the rest of the World of Tiers series, the Riverworld series, and a variety of fan fiction novels on Tarzan and Doc Savage. The sixties had more than done their work.

The 1970s: Gene Wolfe

"There is no revising print. When it's out there, it's out there for all time."—Gene Wolfe

By the seventies, science fiction was a more established and respected writing genre. The New Wave of science fiction was no longer all that new, because authors like Farmer had paved the way. As a result, there was much more room for new talent to grow and flourish. One of these talents was Gene Wolfe, who between 1972 and 1984 worked as a senior editor for the journal *Plant Engineering* until the siren call of science fiction lured him away.

Wolfe's position required a high degree of technical knowledge in a variety of fields. In 2013, in an interview with *Ultan's Library* coeditor, Nigel Price, Wolfe revealed the following:

> *I was the editor for power transmission (hydraulics, gears, pneumatics, belts, et cetera) and fastening and joining (welding, glue, screws, et cetera), and also the editor for cartoons and letters-to-the-editor. There was an electrical editor, a construction editor, a materials-handling editor, a maintenance editor, a safety editor, and so forth. It was hard at times, and easy at others.*
>
> *Oh yes . . . How in the world did I forget this? I was also robot editor. I went to robot school twice, once for hydraulic 'bots and once for all-electric. And I wrote or developed the robotics articles.*

In the same interview, Wolfe also disclosed that he was responsible for "supplying" (that is, "writing") cover articles and providing high-quality images, without the help of QA. When he wasn't writing the articles himself, he would frequently purchase them from technical writers. As a result, he developed a deep appreciation of the profession, because then, like now, it was "a greatly underrated skill."

During his time as a senior editor, Wolfe was able to balance his editing duties and his science fiction writing. Despite the work pressure, he was able to complete *The Fifth Head of Cerberus* and his Book of the New Sun series, both considered to be masterpieces (Figure 4). These stories cemented Wolfe's reputation as one of the greatest science fiction authors of all time. Therefore, the only dilemma he really had to face when he quit *Plant Engineering* was whether he was ready to give up writing technical content—because even science fiction has its limits.

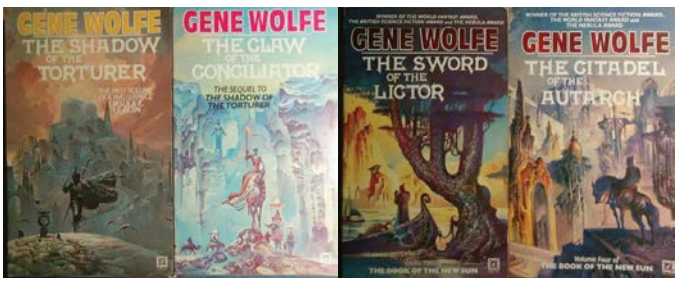


Figure 4. Gene Wolfe's Book of the New Sun series is considered to be a masterpiece of science fiction.

The 1980s to Today

Wolfe's transition helps to illustrate the dramatic evolution the genre had undergone since the time of Ray Cummings. In the mid-eighties, science fiction was no longer categorized as pulp worthy only of cheap magazines. It was now a recognized genre that frequently received mainstream attention. Nerds were starting to become popular. By 2020, they have come to almost completely dominate popular culture.

"What I would say is that the closest connection between my fiction and my day job of technical writing is that a good explanation can be a beautiful thing."—Ted Chiang

In the past 30 years, fandoms have flourished. An insatiable demand has been created, which means that there are now hundreds of new books being published each year, as well as countless short stories, movies, television series, games, comic books, and merchandise. Niche fandoms are now mainstream common knowledge, and with the advent of social media, they've gone viral. As a result, it's much more difficult for readers to discover the latest and greatest science fiction authors—which is why the Hugo Awards exist. Without them, it would be almost impossible to discover Ted Chiang, a technical writer for Microsoft (Figure 5).

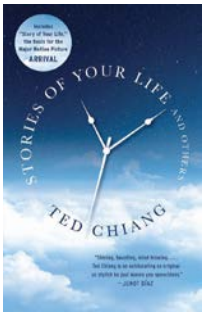


Figure 5. Ted Chiang's Stories of Your Life and Others contains Story of Your Life, which was nominated for the 1999 Hugo Award for Best Novella.

Chiang has been winning awards for his short stories and novellas since the early nineties. However, until recently, he avoided committing to full-time writing, preferring to also do freelance work for Microsoft, where he wrote reference materials for programmers. Chiang's reputation would have enabled him to quit his day job as a technical writer several years ago, but he didn't want to force himself to write novels to make a living. Instead, he preferred to write at his own pace, dividing his time between the two professions. This choice has given him a rare opportunity for introspection on the differences between these two types of writing.

When asked about his two professions, Chiang has frequently responded that although they are not closely aligned in technique, the goals are still fairly similar, and they draw on the same portion of his brain. Both in technical writing and fiction writing, good explanations are important. Therefore, he's interested in clarity and in helping readers understand the concepts he is introducing. As a result, he frequently invests a lot of thought about the best way to communicate his ideas to readers, which has led to some very interesting approaches.

When writing a story, Chiang always first establishes his ending. It is only when he knows where he is going that he can actually begin writing. In my opinion, this can also provide some useful insights into technical writing. Before beginning documentation, we should be asking ourselves about the desired goal of our content and what it needs to accomplish. With that in mind, we can decide on the best method, output type, and publication channel to accomplish that goal. After all, it's not rocket science; it's science fiction!

YEHOSHUA PAUL *(ysp10182@gmail.com) is a father, geek, blogger, and technical communicator. He currently works as a technical communicator for Tufin in Tel Aviv, Israel. Yehoshua has been active in Israel's technical communication industry since 2009. Over the course of his career, he has had a wide range of roles and responsibilities that enabled him to engage in translation, editing, marketing, and product design, as well as technical communication. Yehoshua helped found tekom's Israel chapter and is a certified reviewer for tekom. When he's not attending local technical communication meetups, he writes about historical science fiction and fantasy books for his personal blog, www.seferhaomer.com.*

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Identity DisRuPTiON AND THE Technical Communicator

By DR. LIZ HERMAN | *STC Associate Fellow*

EARLIER THIS YEAR, three organizations in the Washington, DC, area held events that were ideal for technical communicators, although only one was specifically oriented toward a technical communications audience. The first event, in January, was sponsored by the American Council for Technology and Industry Advisory Council (ACT-IAC). It was a workshop for those interested in customer experience (CX) to understand terms and governance around CX while also hearing from those immersed in the process. Terms like human-centered design (HCD), user experience (UX), journey mapping, and customer satisfaction were used. The second event, held in early March, was the Citizen Engagement Summit, sponsored by Federal Computer Week (FCW). It included panel discussions from people with titles like chief content officer, customer experience lead, and chief digital strategy officer. The third event was sponsored by STC's Washington, DC/Baltimore community. It was an informal networking dinner, where one attendee specifically came to find and hire a technical communicator with a very specific skill set. Why were these three events ideal for technical communicators? They showcased why it's an amazing time to be a technical communicator—our talents, skills, and smarts are needed—while also calling attention to the way we have identified ourselves for the past several decades. We need to prepare for an identity disruption.

Our Time Is Now

At the first two events, multiple speakers listed the problems facing agencies that want to do better for their customers. They spoke of federal government websites that reflect the agencies' internal organizational structure rather than tasks and actions that customers expect to see and need to complete. For example, VA.gov previously prominently displayed the FY19 budget submission on its homepage. Veterans aren't accessing VA.gov to read through a budget submission; they're accessing VA.gov for benefit information, like healthcare and education. One speaker emphasized that the agencies do not have the same audiences, and what works at VA.gov does not necessarily work for USDA.gov, for example. It's the structure underneath, he said, that are the customer goals and that makes a difference. Stated goals included more self-service for customers, less wait time, and consistent, reliable UX. Think about the type of people who can address these problems and help organizations meet these goals—it's the technical communicator.

Technical communicators have been thinking about audience and personas, communication, content, design, and digital experiences for quite some time. Others have finally caught on. It's quite posh now to think about how a customer uses a website or interacts with content, and federal agencies are spending real money on these issues. Agencies and contractors alike are hiring people who can help—people like us, but with titles more reflective of the work (or, at least, more reflective of current industry vernacular), such as UX specialist, HCD lead, CX analyst, and content strategist. Perhaps the term "technical communicator" is no longer serving us.

Identity Disruption

Agencies seem to be moving away from the term "technical communication" as we know it and, by association, away from technical communicators. There remains pervasive confusion and misunderstanding about what technical communicators do and how we add value. This is born out in Jeremy Rosselot-Merritt's recent study published in *Technical Communication* and Saul Carliner and Yuan Chen's recent technical communication census work published in *Intercom*.

Rosselot-Merritt's study did the following:

- It confirmed an outdated perception of the field of technical communication and the role of the technical communicator.
- It highlighted a lack of interest by organizations to hire technical communicators.
- It illustrated continued challenges to the legitimization of the field.

When asked what technical communication is, participants listed user guides, repair manuals, parts guides, and operator instructions. Yes, of course, we create these types of documentation, but where is the acute understanding of an audience and its needs? Where is the critical design thinking that enables a high level of customer satisfaction? Where is the strategic thinking, leadership, and collaboration to coalesce around an organization's message? The terms *technical communication* and *technical communicator* just aren't taking us anywhere any more.

Although he was working with a small number of participants in what he termed a pilot study, Rosselot-Merritt found that organizations were largely *not* planning to hire technical communicators. Instead, they were looking to hire program managers or to add technical communication processes to other roles. Lurking in the responses seems to be the rhetorical question, "Why would we need a (or another) technical communicator?" If the perception is repair manuals and parts guides, then the answer is—possibly quite rightly—that they don't.

If, on a random day, Indeed.com has 4,000 more job openings in the United States for a UX designer than for a technical communicator, why do UX specialists represent just 0.8% of Carliner and Chen's participants in the technical communication census? Yes, we skew older, female, and white, but UX isn't solely a younger person's playground. Even though user guides still rank first in the products that census participants had produced in the prior 12 months, knowledge bases, user interfaces, social media content, and even chatbots showed up on the list. Chatbots! How "now!" Our time *is*

now, but we need to pivot and start infusing new words, language, and concepts into the way we see ourselves contributing to the digital and project economy, instead of trying to fight against outdated perceptions of technical communication.

On the Precipice

The Project Management Institute (PMI) annually surveys practitioners and publishes a *Pulse of the Profession* report intended to share trends in project management. This year's theme is a future-focused culture. According to the report, technology advancements and digitalization were top of mind and were where many agencies planned to direct investments. As far as investments in people, the top traits were technical proficiency, leadership acumen, business strategy, and digital skills. Disruption, customer value, and design thinking were also mentioned. Who better to fill these needs than technical communicators?

We know this path better than most. Technology advancements? So many of us learn new technologies on our own to stay current, often with minimal support from our organizations. We know how to learn new technologies, we know how to train others, and, even more valuable, we understand how the technology serves as an enabler to a bigger mission—like CX.

Digitalization and digital skills? Twenty years ago, we were publishing websites, coding our own HTML, and thinking about how to make them work and look better for our audiences. We conquered online help and haven't looked back. We have *always* been on the digital frontier.

Technical proficiency, leadership acumen, and business strategy? Check, check, and check. We're also generally lifelong learners. Most of us, per the technical communication census, didn't even start as technical communicators, but we learned and grew into those roles. We can learn and grow into new roles as well. We might need to shed our old identities to move forward. Let our skill set, experience, talent, and concept of being a technical communicator be our foundation and our guide. Let us embrace being on the precipice of this new reality, where others are finally coming to the table asking for help—our help—in the way they manage their audiences. Their perception of technical communication is outdated and distorted, which is why they're not looking for technical communicators—but they definitely need our design thinking, content strategy, collaboration, communication, and leadership skills.

We have *always* been on the digital frontier.

Career Transition

From a career transition perspective, this is not so much a transition as it is an adoption of new perceptions of ourselves as technical communicators. This is an exciting time to be a technical communicator, because our skill set clearly is in high demand. The role for which organizations are hiring simply goes by other names now. Perhaps this article seems geographically biased, because the three events were all in the Washington, DC, area, where federal agencies are working to tackle customer problems and where UX, HCD, and CX jobs seem plentiful. Indeed.com proves otherwise, as there are positions available throughout the United States.

We will have some of the same challenges we have always had:

- Positions paying too little for the required experience
- Hiring managers favoring knowledge of a specific technology over strategic competencies
- Agencies resisting remote work—although at the time of this writing, perhaps COVID-19 will have managed to temper that resistance somewhat
- An arduous hiring process to work in the federal government

Even with those challenges, technical communicators and the field of technical communication should prepare for disruption.

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Career Transitions:

When "Having Enough" Just Isn't Good Enough

By NITHYA KRISHNAN

CONSIDER A REGULAR morning at work. You've been in the job long enough to perform both simple and complex tasks each day. You've excelled at the way you handle these tasks and manage them quite effortlessly. Do you sometimes feel that this mode of working indicates a saturation? Does it demotivate you because you feel you're not being challenged enough? Or does it annoy you, because you're not learning anything new but seem to be working long hours to finish a plethora of mundane tasks?

Every career has a peak where everything seems to be going great, but there is a natural tendency to slump and reach a sluggish point. Some ignore it and believe that the situation will get better with time. For others, this situation creates restlessness and disinterest, and tackling these feelings is harder than we might anticipate. On one hand, there's the stability of our current situation, which means doing things that are familiar; on the other hand, it could be a dead end.

Many of us experience this situation at different points in our career. You wonder what more you can possibly do in your current role. But as all jobs demand, we need to sustain our productivity despite experiencing these troughs. By reflecting on the fundamentals of our core skills, we can begin considering how we can branch out. And this is what career transitions are all about.

Imagine you're taking a trek for the first time in your life. You've been briefed on what the terrain is like. But through the course of the trek, you experience fluctuations in weather, your campsites are uninhabitable, or you don't find the kind of food you were expecting. Things don't turn out the way you or your guide expected. What do you do in such a scenario? You ponder. You think. You try to apply your past experiences to see what might work in the current situation. This is precisely how a career transition happens. It might be a maze at the beginning, but you get your bearings as you explore all the aspects of the potential change.

There are various reasons to consider a career change—for example, to:

- Get better pay
- Optimize work-life balance
- Tackle new tasks and challenges
- Move to a field that you have a keen interest in

Regardless of the reason, preparation is important when considering making such a change. The better the changes you make today, the better and more fulfilling tomorrow will be.

The Crucial Question: Why the Change?

A career transition requires you to address a fundamental question: Why? Depending on how long you've been in a certain role or job, this is a crucial question to ask yourself. It will help you validate whether this is something momentary or something that needs an investment of time and thought.

Career transitions start with your current role. To ensure a successful career transition, ask yourself the following questions:

- What's incomplete in what I currently do?
- Does my current role make me unhappy?
- If yes, what can fill that gap to turn things around?

Look to mentors, coworkers, or friends to talk through your thoughts. This circle of people likely comes with diverse skills and experiences, and these conversations could spark an idea you hadn't considered and assist you in making a move.

Jot down what you like doing and the strengths you have that can help you execute a certain job. Start assessing yourself on what you do best and the factors that make you excited about tasks or assignments that you performed in the past. There are many assessments available to guide you in your strengths, but the best judge of the job or role that you're most suited to is an introspective *you*.

Here are some thoughts and actions to help you discover your "why."

Look for a New Job or Role in the Same Field

When we spend a lot of time doing a certain job, we get good at it. With time, we might also enjoy the process of doing that job, which comes from learning more about your team and the industry. Over time, you might also involve yourself in tasks that aren't strictly within your role, but your skills and competencies help you execute those tasks. As a result, you might consider changing roles, because you are doing it—you already understand the job, and doing it full time gives you a chance to fully explore the new role as a next step in your career. Look for opportunities where you can leverage your core skills and discover new learning opportunities in a new team.

Look for a New Job or Role in a Different Industry

Perhaps you have been working in your current role for a long time, and it's no longer challenging work for you, or there are no more contributions you can make in that industry. If so, look for similar or related roles in other industries. This can give you a significant change in focus and provide you with a job that uses your skills, but with a twist. For example, a technical communicator might want to switch from technical documentation to writing marketing content or vice versa. In this example, you still use your core skills of storytelling and communication, but in a different arena.

Reinvent Your Personal Career Path

Perhaps you want your career to take a complete turn. Your interests are on one end of your career spectrum, and your current job is on the other end. This reminds me of colleagues and friends who long worked in the technology space and now want to move back to their

roots, literally—yes, back to agriculture—a huge shift, indeed, but not an impossibility.

An entrepreneurial spirit is essential for such shifts, as you must think through the risk, and work accordingly to make such a big change.

"The first step towards getting somewhere is to decide that you're not going to stay where you are."
—J. P. Morgan

Preparing Yourself for a Career Transition

Do Your Groundwork

When considering a career transition, invest time in doing your groundwork toward the shift. Identify the following:

- The possible areas you can move into
- The kinds of roles that suit your skills and strengths
- The core skills required for the new role
- How you can leverage the experience you've gained and use it in the new role

In other words, prepare for your next move. Understand what a new role or job demands, and then assess your skills and ability to do that job.

Skill Assessment

Consider what skills are required to perform a new job, and determine the skills you need to acquire or build. Having the credentials and qualifications that the new job demands puts you in a favorable position for landing an interview. If you're switching roles, identify what your core skills are. Use these as a base, and see how you can branch out. This provides a starting point for learning new skills that fit the job you're considering. If you're moving completely away from what you're currently doing, be sure you understand the core skills of the new job and begin building those.

Attend Interviews

No amount of preparation is enough until you exercise it in the form of interviews. Being prepared is important, but taking action to interview for the job is more crucial. Interviewing helps you learn the specifics of a particular job at a particular company. It also helps you understand how you perform as a job candidate—what went well versus what went poorly—and (hopefully) gives some constructive criticism to learn from.

Network

Build and maintain a circle of professional colleagues to increase your chances of finding and landing your dream job. Although your skill will speak to the job that you're applying for, you'll get to an interview faster if you have the right network in place. Ensure that you keep an updated, professional profile or resume on platforms such as LinkedIn. It's the easiest way for anyone to look you up and see how you fit with the job. Getting recommendations from coworkers, managers, peers, and mentors can help substantiate your potential as a team player.

Shadow Someone with Your Desired Job

Some jobs demand that you already have specific experience. In such cases, consider shadowing an individual who currently holds the job or role you're seeking. Doing this can give you insight into what the job is like and what you must bring to the table in terms of skills and credentials. A look into the job can also help you determine what new skills you need to acquire while you're still performing your current role.

Apply for Internships, Fellowships, or Temporary Assignments

Some companies offer temporary assignments or internships, and you can interview for the role that you aspire to. If it's a good fit, you could be selected to intern in the role. In this way, you can express your interest in a career change, practice the new skills, learn the nuances of the role, and determine through the course of doing the work how well it suits you.

Managing the Emotional Side of a Career Transition

After spending a good number of years in a job, we subconsciously get habituated to it. We might worry about losing that comfort, and in the process get too emotionally attached to it. We might fear that letting go of it could turn our career in the wrong direction. This is how resistance interferes with career change.

Every Job Is a Learning Experience

You've likely spent enough time and thought about making a career change to determine whether it's the right move for you. Just contemplating making a change turns out to be a stressful process, but you tend to know in your heart whether it's time for a change—even if the idea scares you. Overcoming your fears and committing to change is a personal victory. If you're strong enough to decide to change careers, you're equally strong enough to complete the change process and come out victorious. Every job provides an opportunity to learn. This is what builds your professional repertoire. Although a job might be different than your current role, and might demand that you start fresh, it also likely comes with a good share of learning. Nothing is crystal clear when you begin; you build expertise over a period of time. Invest your time responsibly and mindfully, eliminate those fears, and move ahead, and you'll achieve that victory.

Your Path Forward

A career transition is about you and your career. It is not a betrayal of your colleagues or company. Don't be hard on yourself. You likely developed excellent working relationships with colleagues, had mentors along the way, and feel indebted for the help that others have given you. But allowing this to stand between you and a new opportunity does you an injustice. Instead, head out there and make the most of the opportunities that come your way. Your network and relations are here to stay. You never know what opportunities might unfold that allow you to work with these colleagues again.

Embrace Change

Another emotional challenge you might encounter is the need to change certain aspects of your work—especially if you have spent a long time in a certain role and job. With experience comes comfort and an ease of working in the job. It's a habit that happens effortlessly. However, when you change jobs, roles, or careers, that affects the job and the way you function. You must be open to this kind of change and be accepting of it. Your experience might help you navigate through the course of the new job seamlessly. Embrace the change, and try not to be rigid.

Build Your Personal Brand

You've likely taken a significant amount of time to establish yourself in a certain role, and a career transition might seem like all that work will be forgotten and never considered again. Instead, consider that a career transition can give you the chance to keep your core skill intact and add a new dimension to your career repertoire. For example, as a technical communicator, I have always been driven by a customer and user focus. I write for a technical audience. When I took the role of a UX advocate, I continued to keep this core skill intact. In addition to content, I began looking at user-centricity through designs. This helped bring the worlds of content and design together.

Don't Settle Until You Land Your Dream Job

This quote from Steve Jobs has always resonated with me on the topic of career change:

The only way to do great work is to love what you do. If you haven't found it yet, keep looking. Don't settle.

The process of changing careers and searching for a job that suits your skills and personality can be long and frustrating, but when you land that dream job, you understand that it was worth the work and wait. Every job helps you develop traits and skills that you learn along the way or already know how to do. Either way, do them well. Be patient, build your expertise, expand your network, and always be open to learning. This will pave the way for you to find the right job—one that is both professionally and personally rewarding.

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Career Path Crossover: Designing Visual Documentation

By SARA STEIN

OVER THE PAST decade or two, documentation has moved from a linear sequence in PDFs to an information space in HTML, according to Lev Manovich. This evolution has not only affected the medium in which technical communicators write, but it's also shaped the documentation content that's delivered. Setting up an online documentation site requires

technical communicators to leverage a range of visual thinking and design skills beyond writing.

Although you might not completely transition to a different career in visual design, as a technical communicator, you can exercise visual skills when tackling projects like planning a site map schema for online documentation, designing the wireframe layout of the main site pages, and leveraging visual content so information can be understood at a glance. This case study describes how you might do that with a documentation site comprising thousands of documents across multiple branches in a single schema.

Visualizing a Site Map Schema

Information architecture helps people find what they're looking for. Richard Saul Wurman coined the term "information architecture" to describe "the practice of deciding how to arrange the parts of something to be understandable."

In online documentation, the information architecture can be reflected in a site map. When thousands of documents from different solutions and versions are migrated to an online format, it's crucial to have a logical site map that classifies information in a hierarchy, from the most general category to the most specific. The site map depicts the exact structure of the documentation site with major and minor branches reflecting information categories, showing where individual pages reside within that structure.

Using a mind mapping tool such as MindManager or XMind to map the taxonomy, the information architecture of a documentation site can be visualized as a schema. Technical communicators can visualize information as hierarchical building blocks when they add major and minor branches to the schema. The structure of this collection of major and minor branches forms the documentation site map.

The schema can be expanded or collapsed to view details of the branches. It can also be converted to an HTML or CSV format and imported into the site as the actual classification framework. The documentation site's hierarchy is built according to the structure of the imported file.

In this case study, the documentation site consists of six schema levels, from a line of business as the highest (or most general) level to document content as the lowest (or most granular) level.

Table 1. Information categories reflected in schema levels from first (most general) to sixth (most granular).

Schema Level	Category	Representation
First level	Line of business	LOB 1
Second level	Product	Product A
Third level	Version number—major	Product A 7.x
Fourth level	Version number—specific	Product A 7.3
Fifth level	Available documents	Product A 7.3 User Guide
Sixth level	Document content	Not shown in schema

Product Documentation Schema

In a documentation site map, most of the schema consists of product documentation. The complexity of the product documentation schema depends on the type of products. For example, if products can be grouped together under a super-category, then they can be accessed via the parent level. If products cannot be grouped together, then they become the top level, or main gateway, to accessing the documentation.

Complexity also depends on the number of product versions. If the customer base uses a wide range of product versions, the site map schema must accommodate branches for all versions so that all relevant documentation can be accessed from the site.

Six levels or information categories were visualized in this site map schema:

- **First level**—line of business. This is the broadest category of information. If we visualize information as building blocks, the lines of business form the top row (see Figure 1).
- **Second level**—product. All products are arranged as building blocks under their parent line of business. In this site map schema, each product can belong to only one line of business.
- **Third level**—major version number. The third level of the site map schema reflects major version categories, such as 7.x, 6.x, and 5.x. The major category—for example, 7.x—includes all versions within that family.
- **Fourth level**—specific version number. This level contains minor version categories, such as 7.3, 7.2, and 7.1 (see Figure 2).
- **Fifth level**—available documents. All documents relevant to a specific version for a specific product, such as Installation Guide, Implementer Guide, and User Guide, are reflected in the fifth level of the site map schema.
- **Sixth level**—content of document. This is the most granular level of the site map schema and represents the actual document content screen by screen. The content level is not depicted in the site map schema since it is too detailed, but it is represented in the wireframe stage.

Although the hierarchy can contain several levels, if the information architecture is logical, users will easily learn how to navigate the site and know where to go next. Visualizing a comprehensive site map when planning an online documentation site helps to facilitate a positive user experience.

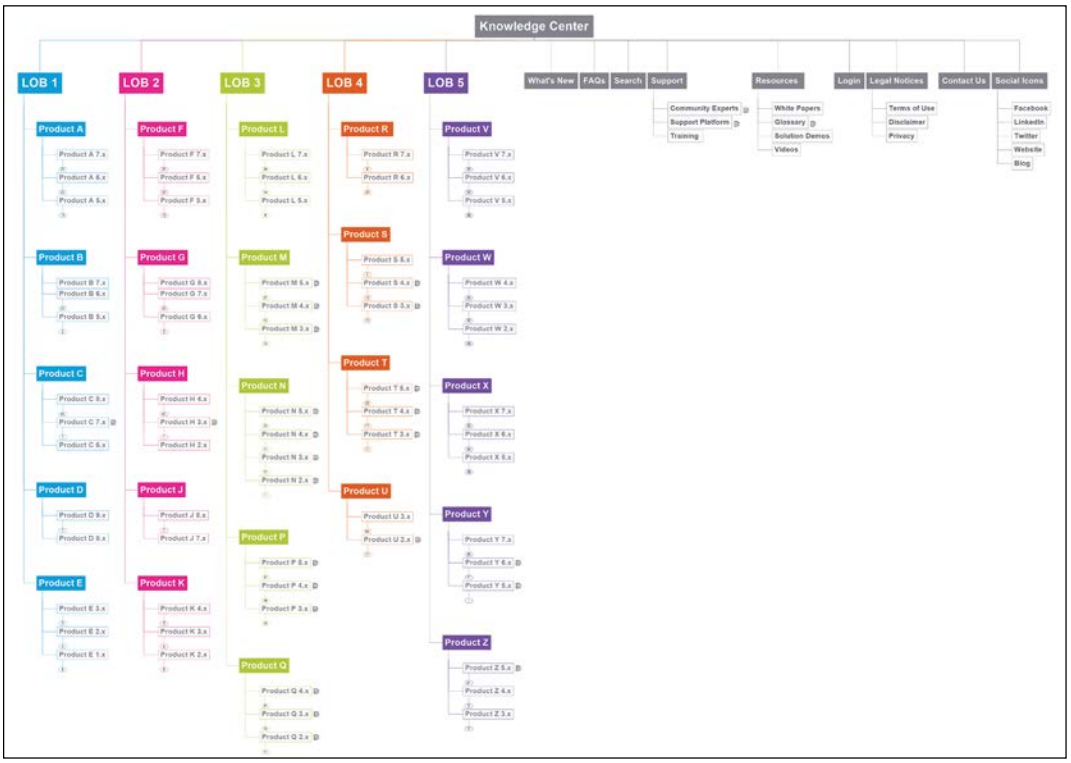

Figure 1. Visualizing a site map schema. The top-level category represents the broadest information category (line of business), and the second-level category represents products. The gray topics represent the ever-present header and footer links.

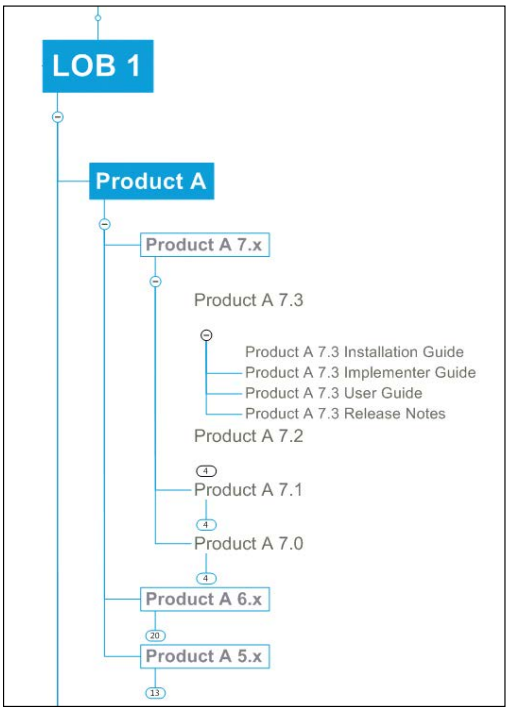

Figure 2. Visualizing hierarchy within a line of business. Products form the second level in the site map schema. The third level is major version numbers (7.x, 6.x, and 5.x), and the fourth level is minor version numbers (7.3, 7.2, 7.1, and 7.0). The fifth level in the schema is types of documents. The lower level in the site map schema—the content pages—is not shown in the schema.

Support and Knowledge Links

In the site map schema, the gray elements represent links that are always present in the header and footer. The header links connect users to external support, training, and knowledge sites that go beyond specific product documentation (see Figure 3).

The footer links are standard for a company website: legal notices, contact information for global offices, and icons linking to social media channels (see Figure 4). Placing the header and footer links in the site map schema helps technical communicators envision what type of information will be available to users on every page in the documentation site.

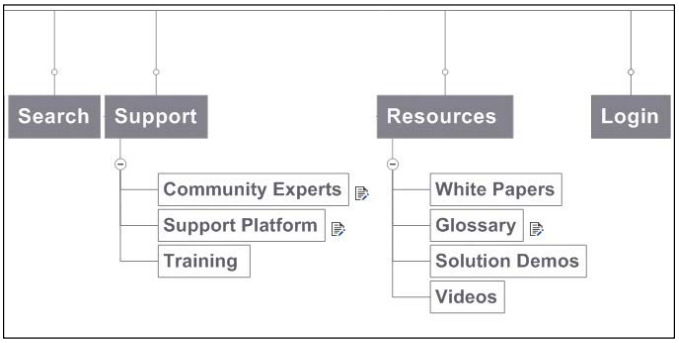

Figure 3. Ever-present links in the header or banner.

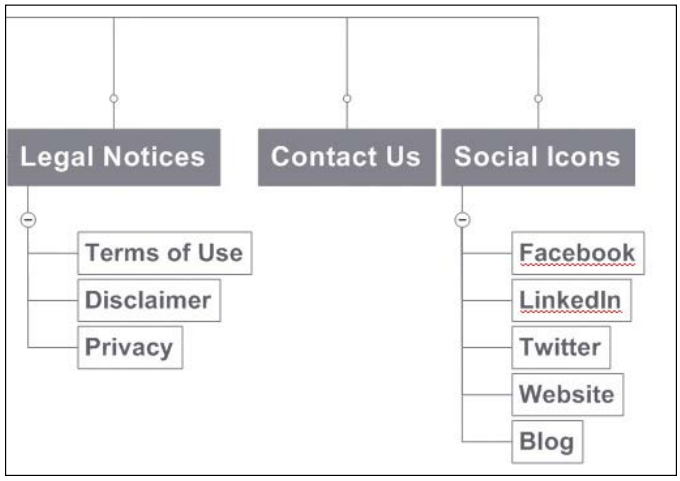

Figure 4. Ever-present links in the footer.

Wireframing the Layout of a Documentation Site

Once the site map has been mapped out as a schema containing all branches of the documentation hierarchy, the next step is to consider how those branches will appear as pages in a website.

Planning the layout of website pages involves wireframing or using a grid that divides a page into multiple columns and rows. In the wireframing stage, technical communicators can chunk information as elements and place them in a balanced way within the grid.

For the wireframe design in this example, a 1,024 x 768 pixel-width screen was divided into 16 equal units. In a documentation site, the actual grid is invisible, but it's a critical tool in the design process since it helps us visualize where all the elements will sit on each page.

As Ellen Lupton said, one of the most humane functions of design is "to help readers avoid reading." The aim of a wireframe design is to create a layout that enables users to find what they're looking for quickly and easily. To that end, the wireframe design includes the following visual elements:

- **Navigation tiles.** Visible tiles reflect high-level categories that are meaningful to the user, so the user knows where to find specific information. The logic behind these categories is the hierarchy of the site map schema, so that the first and second levels are depicted in navigation tiles.
- **White space.** In an age of "too much information," the last thing users want is to be visually bombarded. Don't underestimate the power of white space. Using white space generously around the different information elements in the wireframe gives them prominence and helps draw attention to them. If documentation webpages are very dense with information, it requires more effort to scan, and find, what you're looking for. Trying to find information on websites that don't have much white space can be like looking for a needle in a haystack.
- **Search bar with filters.** Featured in the center of the top part of the screen, the search bar is very prominent, so users can easily search from any page.
- **Breadcrumbs.** The webpage trail provides context so users can understand how the currently viewed page relates to the bigger picture. If a document is accessed from the navigation tiles, the breadcrumbs show, for example, the line of business and the product.

Wireframe for the First Level in the Schema: Line of Business

When we define an online-information layout, each screen represents a different level in the hierarchy. For example, the documentation site's landing page represents the top-level category in the schema—line of business—where each line of business is depicted with a navigation tile (see Figure 5).

Navigation tiles for lines of business include the name, a short description, and a unique icon (see mockups in Figure 6). The short description provides context to users, especially new customers. Once customers are familiar with the documentation site, the line of business icon is recognizable at a glance.

What's New and FAQs are displayed for all lines of business. The information is dynamic; it's constantly updated with an expiration date to reflect only current information.

Wireframe for the Second Level in the Schema: Product

When users click a line of business navigation tile, they enter the second level of the schema: The product page for that specific line of business. Each product is depicted with a navigation tile. These navigation tiles reflect the second-level branches of the site map schema (see Figure 7).

What's New is displayed for all products within a specific line of business.

Wireframe for the Third through Fifth Levels in the Schema: Version Numbers and Documents

When users are within the product category, the version hierarchy is displayed in the filter sidebar on the left. Using a dynamic filter bar allows three levels of the site map schema to be displayed on the same page: major and specific version numbers are displayed on the left, whereas available documents for the selected version are displayed on the right (see Figure 8).

The major version category (for example, 3.x) represents the third level in the site map schema and includes all versions released under 3.x.

Specific versions (for example, 3.3, 3.2, and 3.1) represent the fourth level in the site map schema and can

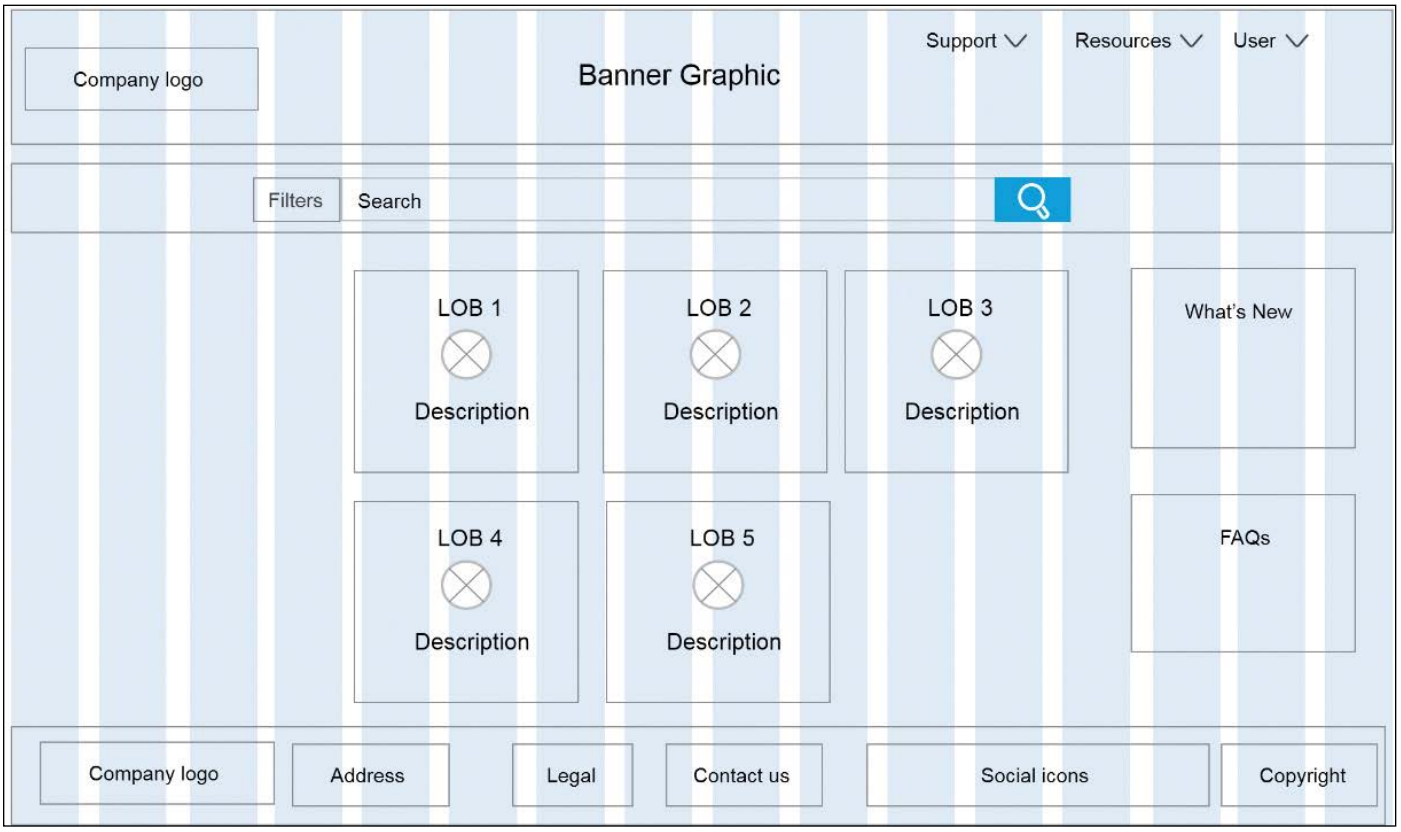

Figure 5. Wireframe depicting the landing page for a documentation site. Navigation tiles are shown for the top-level category in the site map schema: line of business (LOB). What's New and FAQs are displayed for all lines of business.

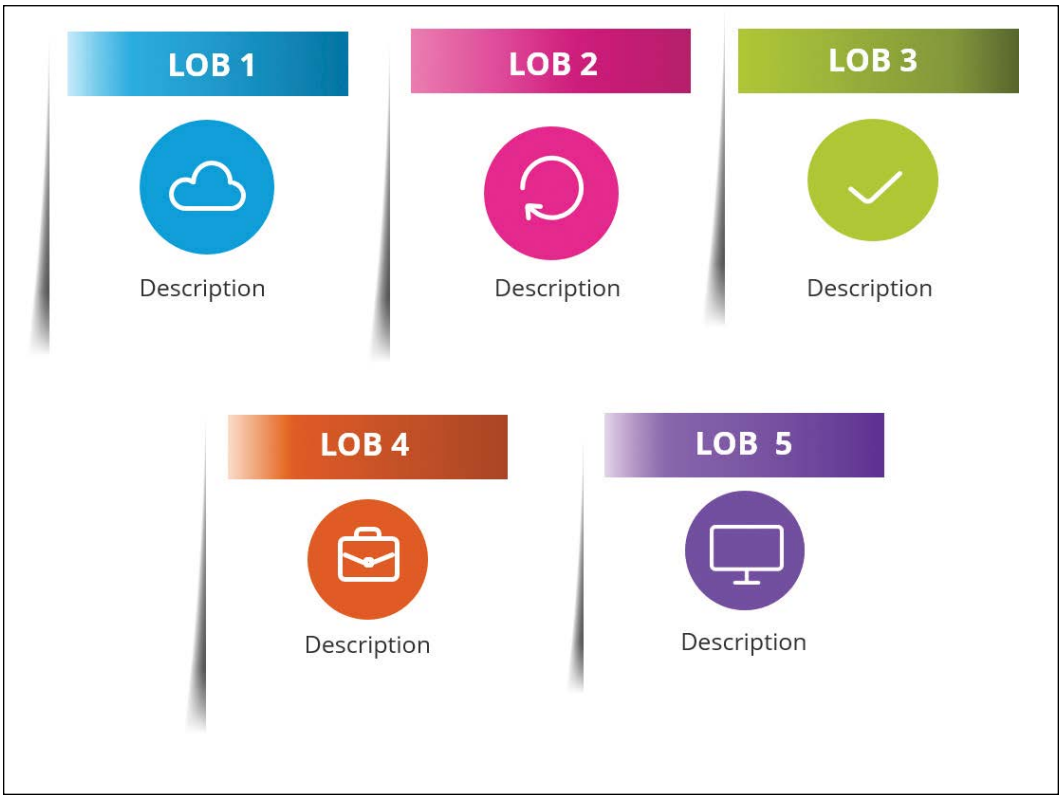

Figure 6. Navigation tile mockups for lines of business.

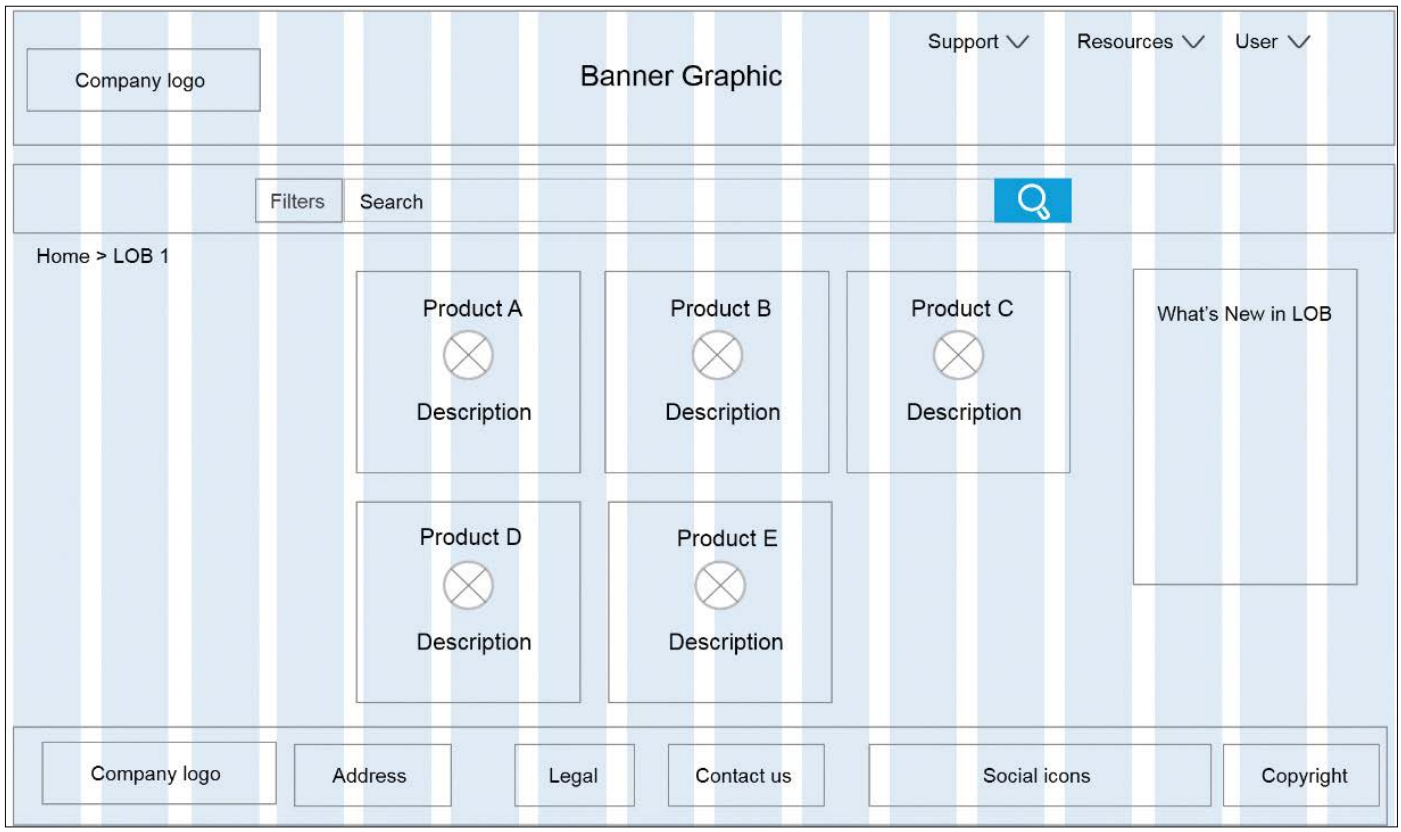

Figure 7. Wireframe depicting a product landing page within a line of business. Navigation tiles are shown for the second-level category in the site map schema: products.

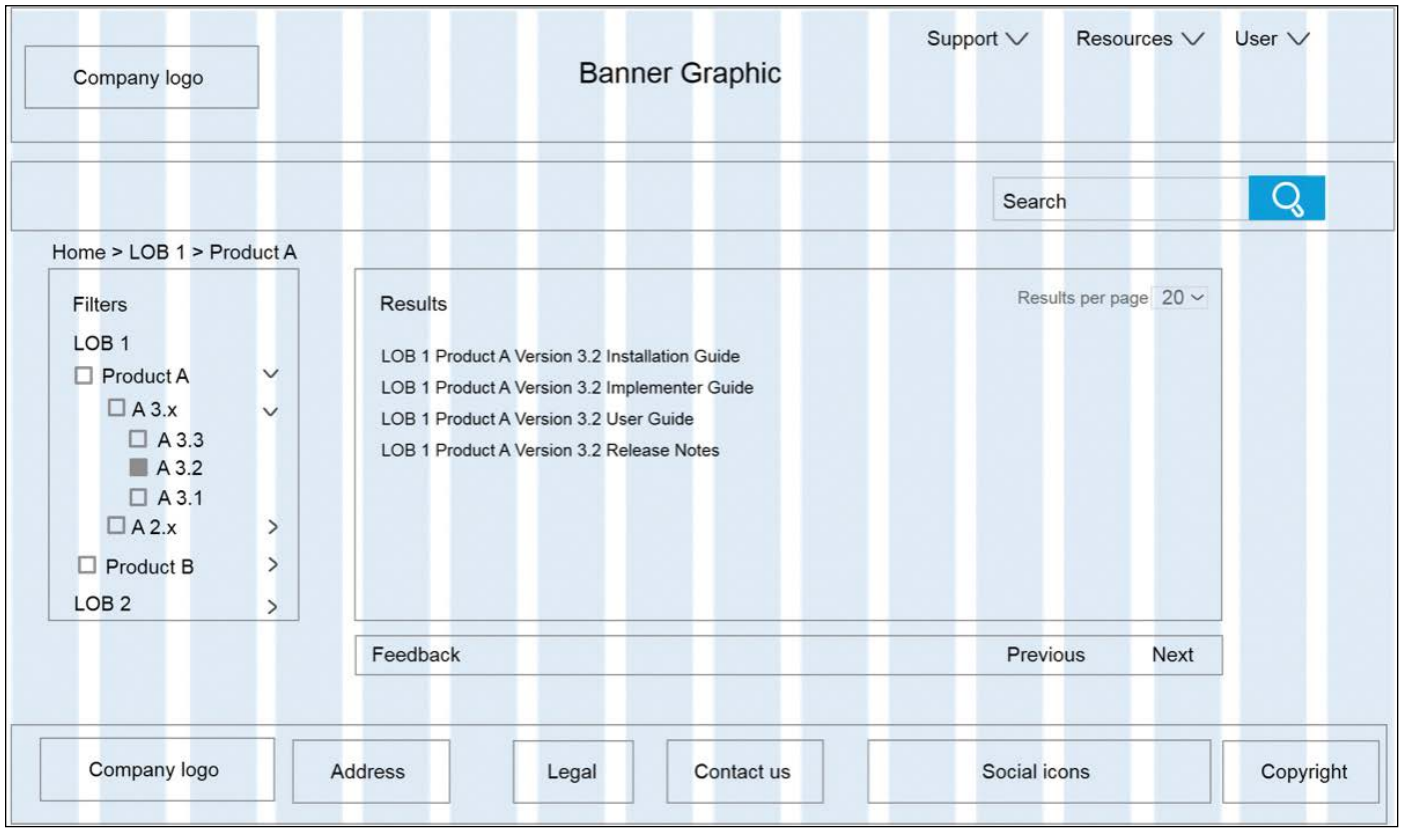

Figure 8. Major and specific version numbers are displayed in the left filter bar. Available documents for a selected version are displayed on the right. This wireframe contains three levels of the site map schema: major version, specific version, and documents.

be displayed collectively or individually. When users click on the relevant version, the fifth level in the hierarchy is displayed on the right: types of documents, such as the Installation Guide, Implementer Guide, and User Guide.

Wireframe for the Sixth Level in the Schema: Content

After users click a specific document name, they enter a content page, which represents the lowest or most granular level in the site map hierarchy. Every content page is typically a single topic, and the topics within a document are arranged in their own hierarchy, as reflected in the navigation bar or table of contents (see Figure 9).

To facilitate online reading, the content width of a document page should not span the entire screen. If the line length is too long, it's difficult for users to find the next line, and they can end up reading the same line twice. In this wireframe design for desktop, the content width is about two-thirds of the entire grid width. In HTML, this translates to about 100 characters per line.

The visual elements exclusive to a content page are as follows:

- **Navigation bar (TOC).** The table of contents is displayed to the left of any content page and is dynamically synchronized with the currently displayed page. The topic displayed in the content pane is highlighted using a bold font in the table of contents. The navigation bar displays the hierarchy of all topics in a single document and facilitates a bird's-eye view of an entire document.
- **Action buttons.** Displayed at the top-right of every content page, action buttons allow users to take content and drag it to their personal domain. As Cameron Koczon argues, the ability to pull relevant content means that content is orbital and more user-oriented. These action buttons allow users to:
  - Jump to previous and next topics
  - Send user feedback
  - Generate their own PDFs from selected topics
  - Make customized document collections
  - Monitor document updates via a watch list

Leveraging Visual Content

When it comes to reading documentation, users seldom have patience for lengthy descriptions or too much information. They scan documentation to find what they're looking for, and often latch onto graphics as their main reference point, because people process graphics faster than text.

The brain can identify images seen for as little as 13 milliseconds (ms). That's superfast compared to the average time it takes to process a letter (476 ms) or a word (441 ms), according to work by Mary Potter and her colleagues.

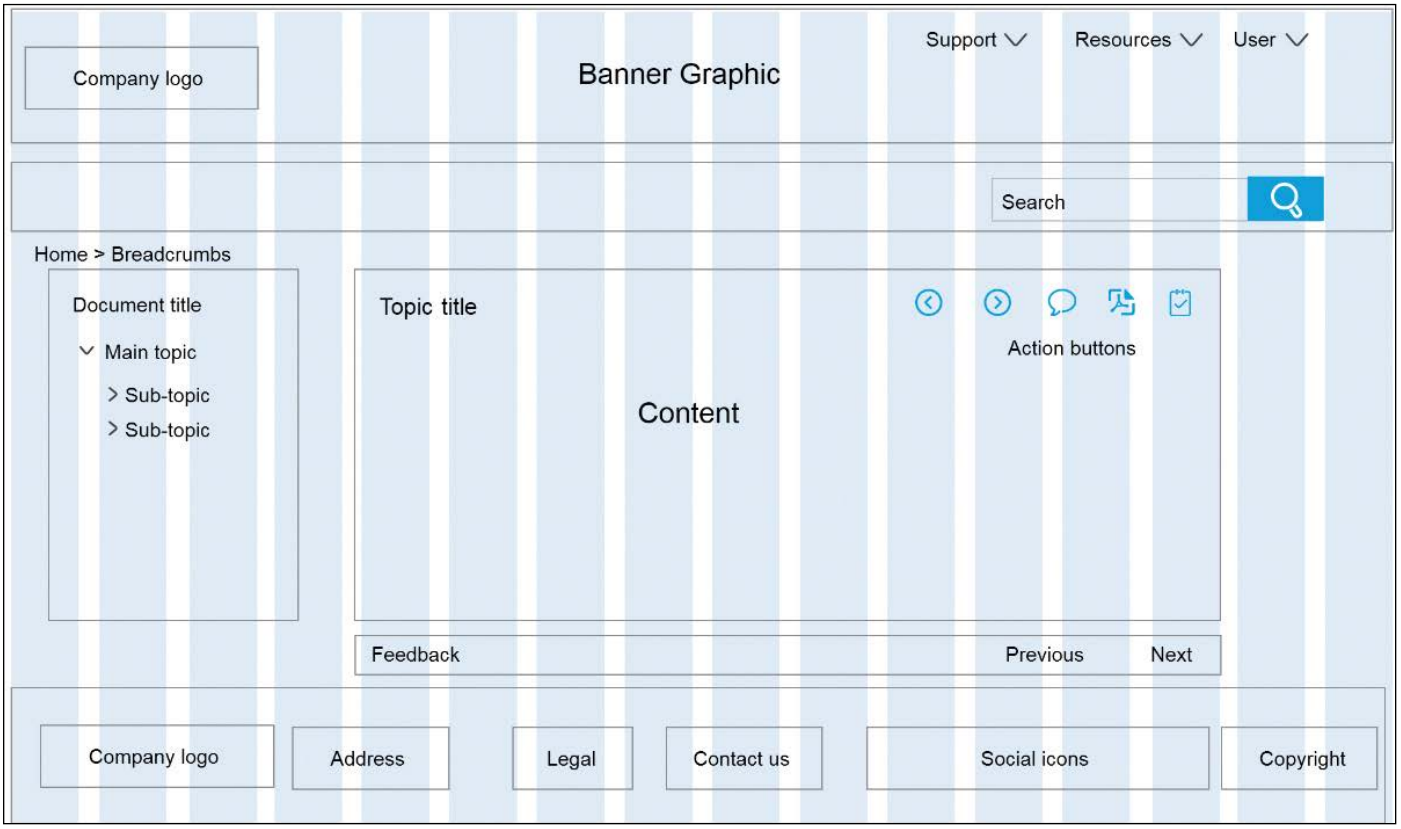

Figure 9. Wireframe depicting a content page for a document. This reflects the most granular level within the site map schema. Visual elements exclusive to a content page are the TOC hierarchy on the left and the action buttons at the top right.

Signposting content with visual cues helps users more easily scan documentation to find what they need and avoid reading, which requires cognitive effort.

In online documentation, the following visual cues help users to scan text and avoid reading:

- **Fonts.** Different fonts are used to differentiate body text from code text, for example, and to obtain maximum clarity and legibility.
- **Note icons.** Specialized types of text are tagged with an icon and label to facilitate rapid processing.
- **Infographics.** Vector graphics and icons, together with text, help simplify complex information so it's understood at a glance.

Fonts

The choice of fonts for an online documentation site is significant when the text must be clear, readable, and legible, and font sizes and line spacing vary according to device (see Table 2).

Online, it's easier for users to read sans serif typefaces—fonts that don't have extra embellishments on the letters—rather than serif typefaces. Sans serif typefaces are cleaner, leaner, and have excellent legibility. Examples of sans serif fonts include Open Sans, Verdana, and Futura. Open Sans, designed by Steve Matteson, is optimized for print, web, and mobile interfaces, and has extra kerning (space) between characters, making it easy to read.

To differentiate regular body text from code, consider using a special font for code that is optimized for the web, such as Lucida Sans Typewriter (see Figure 10). The relatively large x-height of Lucida Sans Typewriter makes it easier to read than traditional code typefaces such as Courier.

Table 2. Body font size and line spacing vary according to device. Text readability changes according to device, as a function of how far the text is from our eyes.

	HTML	Printed PDF	Mobile
Body font size (font-size)	1.25 rems	10 points	1 rem
Line spacing (line-height)	150%	120%	120%
Content width	100–120 characters	90–100 characters	50–60 characters

Users view online documentation differently than printed PDFs, since a desktop is usually farther from the eyes than a printed page. For that reason, font sizes in online documentation must be larger than standard sizes in print. A font size that looks good in print will look too small on a desktop. See Figures 11 and 12 for examples of HTML and PDF font size and line spacing.

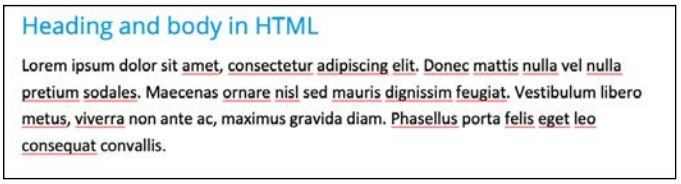
Heading and body in HTML
Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. Donec mattis nulla vel nulla pretium sodales. Maecenas ornare nisl sed mauris dignissim feugiat. Vestibulum libero metus, viverra non ante ac, maximus gravida diam. Phasellus porta felis eget leo consequat convallis.

Figure 11. Opens Sans font in HTML has a larger font size and line spacing than in a PDF.

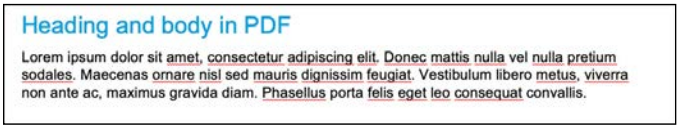
Heading and body in PDF
Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. Donec mattis nulla vel nulla pretium sodales. Maecenas ornare nisl sed mauris dignissim feugiat. Vestibulum libero metus, viverra non ante ac, maximus gravida diam. Phasellus porta felis eget leo consequat convallis.

Figure 12. Arial font in a PDF has a smaller font size and line spacing than in HTML.

Note Icons

Users rarely read an entire page of text, but instead scan to find what they're looking for. Some traditional ways of breaking up text into smaller chunks are to use headings, bulleted and numbered lists, and tables. As documentation evolves into an online format, the use of visual signposting has become more common, especially in note icons.

Assigning different icons to different note styles helps users differentiate between types of notes, such as Note, Important, Example, Reference, Tip, and Troubleshooting.

Each note type has three components:

- **Icon.** The note type is visually represented by a symbol (signifier).
- **Label**. A text label (signified) indicates the note name. Providing the icon name next to the icon helps reduce ambiguity about the icon's meaning.
- **Color.** A unique color is assigned to each note type.

```
<link rel="stylesheet" type="text/css"
href="https://maxcdn.bootstrapcdn.com/font-awesome/4.7.0/css/font-
awesome.min.css">

<script src="https://code.jquery.com/jquery-3.1.1.min.js"
integrity="sha256-hVVnYaiADRTO2PzUGmuLJr8BLUSjGIZsDYGmIJLv2b8="
crossorigin="anonymous"></script>
```

Figure 10. The Lucida Sans Typewriter font has a relatively high x-height, so letters are legible and easily differentiated.

These three identifiers—icon, label, and color—work together to facilitate easy scanning of blocks of text, as illustrated in Figure 13.

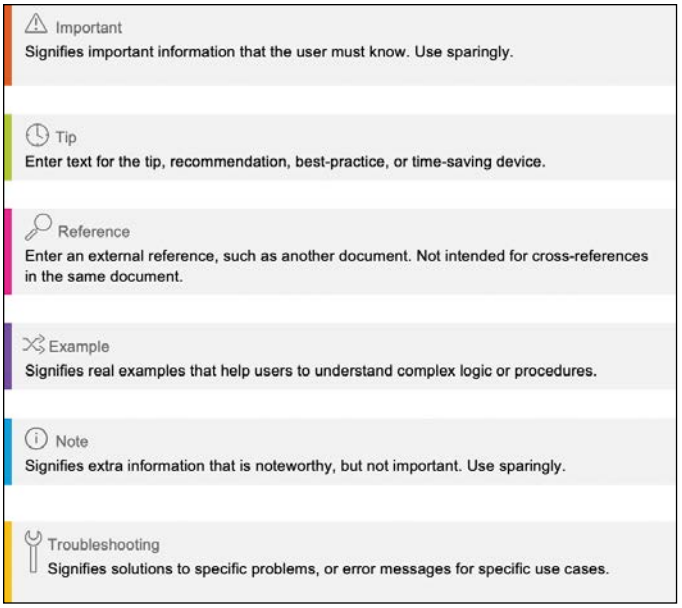
Important
Signifies important information that the user must know. Use sparingly.
Tip
Enter text for the tip, recommendation, best-practice, or time-saving device.
Reference
Enter an external reference, such as another document. Not intended for cross-references in the same document.
Example
Signifies real examples that help users to understand complex logic or procedures.
Note
Signifies extra information that is noteworthy, but not important. Use sparingly.
Troubleshooting
Signifies solutions to specific problems, or error messages for specific use cases.

Figure 13. Note icons differentiated by icon, note type label, and color.

Infographics

End-user documentation often contains technical information that's hard to understand, especially when the text is lengthy and complex. An infographic is meant to represent information visually to tell a story. A good infographic simplifies complex information so that users can understand it at a glance.

There is also evidence that images attract more attention than words. Using eye-tracking equipment that produces heat maps, the SEO company Moz studied users as they viewed Google search results. The aggregated heat map in Figure 14 shows that a search result with an image attracted much more attention (yellow area) than a search result without an image (red area).

In end-user documentation, this means that readers are likely to focus on available infographics—and not on text—as their main reference point.

Three main types of infographics are used in technical communication (see Figure 15).

- Workflow, a bird's-eye view of an ordered procedure that spans several topics, such as how to install a solution.

Search
The Ridiculously Thorough Guide to Making Your Own Pizza
how to make home made pizza - YouTube
Pizza Recipe : How to Make Homemade Pizza Video
How to Make Pizza - wikiHow
How to make pizza at home
How to make a pizza
How to make Pizza
TLC Cooking "How to Make Pizza"
How to make pizza video - How to cook - BBC Good Food
Recipe For Pizza

Figure 14. Search results with images get more attention. Source: Peter J. Meyers. 2011. "Eye-Tracking Google SERPs—5 Tales of Pizza." Moz, 5 October 2011. https://moz.com/blog/eyetracking-google-serps.

- Data flow, a simplified representation of information flow, such as architecture.
- Concept, a visual representation of a functionality or concept.

When technical communicators convey complex processes or flows as infographics, they help readers understand information at a glance and improve the overall customer experience.

Here are some general guidelines that help leverage infographics in online documentation:

- Display infographics in their full size. It's not recommended to show images as thumbnails, since this requires extra effort from users to click an image to see it clearly. Users should be able to process an infographic at first glance.
- Place infographics at the top half of the screen. Eye-tracking studies show this is where people focus most of their attention.
- Create interactive graphics (see Figure 16) that allow users to jump to relevant topics from the infographic. For example, an infographic with a numbered procedure can link each number to the topic that describes that procedure. Tools such as Flare allow technical communicators to create interactive graphics with an image map.

Infographics do not replace text altogether; they complement the text so users can understand information at a glance. As documentation becomes more visual in an online medium, infographics will become more important as vehicles of information.

Conclusion

Online documentation is a more visual and interactive medium than traditional PDFs, and as such, technical communicators can leverage visual skills to structure and convey information in a more visual way. In an information era, the role of technical communicators is to help users find the information they're looking for and understand the context—not to overload users with too much information, whose context is not clear.

As visual information is easier to process than text, technical communicators can offer a better user experience by providing information visually. This view of visual documentation begins in the site map schema stage, continues throughout wireframing, and is completed online with signposted content and infographics that can be understood at a glance.

SARA STEIN *(sara.stein@niceactimize.com) is a senior technical writer and infographics expert at NICE Ltd. She has worked for 20 years writing and designing documentation for the Israeli high-tech industry, with a focus on visual documentation and infographics for the internet.*

Note: The opinions expressed herein are the author's and are not expressed by NICE Ltd.

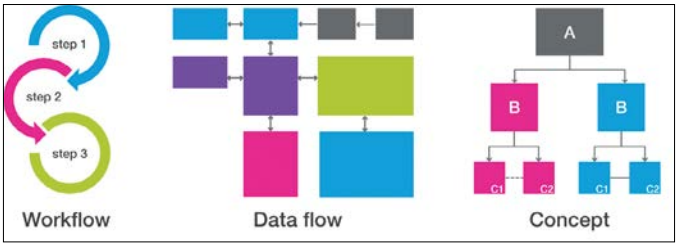

Figure 15. Three infographic types in technical documentation.

Figure 16. This infographic prototype contains five segments, and each segment refers to a separate procedure. Clicking on a segment allows users to jump to the relevant topic.

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STC Position Statement: Response to Racism and Inequity

AS COMMUNICATORS, STC supports those who use their voices to communicate the negative impact of racism and inequity in the USA and around the world. We stand with our members and our professional community against racism, violence, and hate.

During this impassioned time, our members can use their listening and writing skills to learn more about the challenges our world faces and to share that knowledge with others.

As a Society, we can also learn and do more to address issues of racism and other biases in our profession. In the coming months, our Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Advisory Panel will listen, learn, and teach so that all members will feel safe and included in STC events, publications, and communities.

The STC Board of Directors is establishing a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Advisory Panel (DEIAP), to provide advice, insight, and recommendations on matters of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) to both the STC Board and the STC staff. If you're interested in participating, email wendyapmp@gmail.com.

Call for *Technical Communication* Cover Illustrations!

STC IS PLEASED to announce the call for cover illustrations for the February and May 2021 issues of *Technical Communication*. The deadline for submissions is 1 December 2020.

- For the February 2021 issue, we invite cover illustrations on the subject of communicating public health and safety in a crisis.
- For the May 2021 issue, we invite cover illustrations on the subject of cultivating professional life in a virtual world.

Cover illustrations might be diagrams, drawings, photographs, collages, infographics, cartoons, comic strips, or brief graphic narratives.

For either issue, please submit your cover illustration (approximately 20×20 cm or 8×8 inches) as a high-resolution (300 dpi or better) jpg file by 1 December 2020 to tceditor@stc.org with a brief explanation (100-200 words) of how your illustration addresses the cover subject. A five-member international jury of specialists will organize anonymous review of the submissions and choose each issue's cover illustration. Honorable mentions will be published inside the journal.

To view previous winning cover illustrations, please visit **www.stc.org/techcomm/propose-a-cover-illustration/.**

Upcoming Webinars

Resume Secrets That Might Surprise You

19 August 2020 - 2:00 PM EDT

Speaker: Jack Molsani, President, Prospring Technical Staffing

After seeing candidate after candidate skipped over because what they had (or didn't have) in their resumes, Jack has compiled little-known facts about how employers view and reject candidates based solely on their resumes.

The Top 10 Mistakes TechComm Professionals Make When Looking for Work

26 August 2020 - 2:00 PM EDT

Speaker: Jack Molisani, President, Prospring Technical Staffing

From writing a resume to applying for jobs, there are a range of small, common mistakes that can derail your job search. In this webinar Jack will discuss the top 10 mistakes professionals make when looking for work (whether contract, staff, or consulting), with proactive tips on how to avoid these pitfalls and increase your chances of getting that next job or contract.

Portfolios and Interview Strategies

2 September 2020 - 2:00 PM EDT

Speaker: Jack Molisani, President, Prospring Technical Staffing

In this webinar learn how a portfolio is not just a collection of writing samples–it is a tool you can use to control an interview and achieve specific objectives that result in a job offer. The webinar includes what to put in a portfolio, how to get things to put in your portfolio, and most importantly, how to use your portfolio to ace a job interview.

Career Advancement Through Personal Branding

9 September 2020 - 2:00 PM EDT

Speaker: Jack Molisani, President, Prospring Technical Staffing

How is content strategy and technical communication viewed in your organization? Do the C-Suite executives think of your department as a core part of the development team, or a burdensome commodity to be acquired at the lowest possible price given an acceptable level of quality? What can you be doing to promote your corporate value and advance your career? Attend this webinar and find out!

When Your Ship Comes In: Increasing Your Corporate Value

16 September 2020 - 2:00 PM EDT

Speaker: Jack Molsani, President, Prospring Technical Staffing

In this webinar professional recruiter, business owner and best-selling author Jack Molisani will discuss short-term tactics and long-term strategies for increasing your corporate value, your personal satisfaction, and your standard of living.

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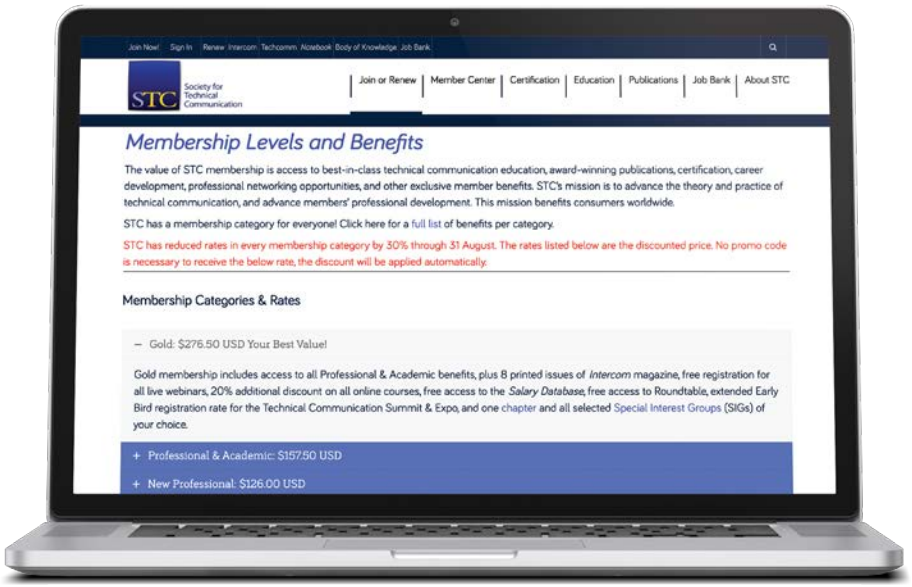
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STC's *Technical Communication* Ranks in Ingenta Connect's Top 100

IN MAY 2020, STC's journal, *Technical Communication,* was recognized by Ingenta Connect, the world's largest resource for scholarly publications, for being among it's top 100 journals. *Technical Communication* ranked eighty-fourth out of eleven thousand journals in Ingenta Connect's catalog. STC thanks Editor-in-Chief Sam Dragga, PhD, for his diligent efforts in delivering such valuable research and content for the field of technical communication.

Playing by the Rules

BY MICHELLE CORBIN | *STC Senior Member*

HI, MY NAME'S Michelle. I'm a technical editor, and I'm a descriptivist. Most of you right now are likely scratching your head, saying, "What was that?" I hope you'll allow me to be a bit esoteric this month, as I dive headfirst down the rabbit hole and into a linguistic debate about grammar and usage, rules and conventions, and the ever-changing nature of language.

The Rabbit Hole

I've always been a rule follower. Rules give structure, set standards, and in some way level the playing field. Merriam-Webster says that a rule is "a prescribed guide for conduct or action; a regulation or bylaw governing procedure or controlling conduct." As a technical editor who does copy editing, you'd think that I'd be a strict grammar rule follower—a prescriptivist. As I explored the linguistics principles of descriptivism and prescriptivism, however, I had to confess to being a descriptivist. Join me in falling down the rabbit hole here.

Richard Nordquist wrote an interesting article for the nonlinguist about descriptive grammar. He states that most teachers and editors of nonfiction are prescriptive grammarians who "do their darndest to enforce the rules of 'correct' and 'incorrect' usage." In the article, he paints the two sides of prescriptivism and descriptivism as being on the far ends of this spectrum, with little acknowledgment that the real truth might be somewhere in the middle.

At this point down this rabbit hole, consider one of the more esoteric blogs: *Arrant Pedantry* by Jonathon Owen. He states very definitively that descriptivists and prescriptivists are *not* opposites and brings the idea of "Standard English" into the debate. I love his quote about the profession of editing: "Users of Standard English put some care into what they say or write. This is especially true of most published writing; the entire profession of editing is dedicated to putting care into the written word."

Enter Steven Pinker to this debate. He wrote a *Slate* essay about a *New Yorker* article that stirred up the debate between descriptivists and prescriptivists. (Pinker is a professor of cognitive science who frequently writes about language, and I highly recommend any of his books or TED talks). He, like Owen, dismantles this dichotomy: "The thoughtful, nondichotomous position on language depends on a simple insight: Rules of proper usage are *tacit conventions*. Conventions are unstated agreements within a community to abide by a single way of doing things—not because there is any inherent advantage to the choice, but because there is an advantage to everyone making the *same* choice."

Rules and Conventions

Technical editors make choices constantly while editing content. They rely on style guides, which rely on grammar and usage guides, which rely on dictionaries. All of these resources include rules—or conventions, as Pinker suggests—that help technical editors make careful, considered choices about how to make the content useful, usable, and consistent.

At this point, I'm going to resurface from our journey down this rabbit hole and share with you a fellow technical editor's views on rules. Jean Hollis Weber frequently talks about "avoiding the grammar trap," which means that technical editors should not focus so much on the grammar rules and copy editing, but instead focus on the bigger picture and comprehensive editing. She says that there are three types of rules:

- Essential rules, such as subject-verb agreement or dangling participles
- Nonessential rules, such as using "which" versus "that" in relative clauses, or many comma rules
- Fake rules, like split infinitives or ending a sentence with a preposition

This delineation into three types of rules makes great sense to this proud descriptivist.

Conclusion

It seems to me that the descriptivist versus prescriptivist debate boils down to the use of the word *rule*. Because language is ever-changing, the rules also need to adapt, but it's hard to play by the rules if they're always changing. I think that's why Weber's rule classification comes in handy, as rules can be reclassified as essential, nonessential, or fake—so a descriptivist technical editor like me can still play by the rules.

In Editing Matters, Michelle Corbin covers matters (topics) about editing that matter (are of consequence) to communicators of all kinds. Watch this space to understand more about editing and what you can do to improve the quality of your content. To suggest a topic or ask a question, contact Michelle at *michelle.l.corbin@gmail.com*.

REFERENCES ON PAGE 35

Persona Theory, Now and Then

BY THOMAS BARKER | *STC Fellow*

IN THIS COLUMN, I'll look back to an early academic conversation about personas and reader analysis. It's sometimes useful to reflect on hidden gems of scholarship in technical writing—for example, that ideas of human-centered design—and specifically how our current thinking, especially about *personas*—might have derived from the examination of government policy documents back in 1983.

What Is a Persona?

First, a definition. A persona, as discussed here and shown in Figure 1, refers to a marketing and general document design tool consisting of a description of an often very narrow market or user segment. Specific and highly detailed persona descriptions, as argued by Alan Cooper in *The Inmates Are Running the Asylum*, have a special power over general, abstract descriptions: their very specificity suits them for general use.

The persona is like a "super profile." We know about profiles, such as those we create in social media and other applications. They are everywhere today. To turn your profile into a persona, however, it would need to be an amalgam of other profiles with similar motivations, needs, and data about buying habits—a super profile made up of details supported by data.

The magic of the persona happens when the super profile triggers design decisions and outcomes, resulting in a product or pitch that grabs everybody described by the persona. Products like roller luggage and sidewalk ramps have become commonplace but were originally designed for very specific users. This is the magic of personas to deliver a *one-size-fits-all* from a *one-size-fits-one* approach.

The Now

Jeanne L. Higbee and Emily Goff's *Pedagogy and Student Services for Institutional Transformation: Implementing Universal Design in Higher Education* is all about the magic of the persona. The authors refer to it as universal design (UD). Here, we again see the utility of not a general, but a specific, design: accommodation for people with disabilities. It's all over higher

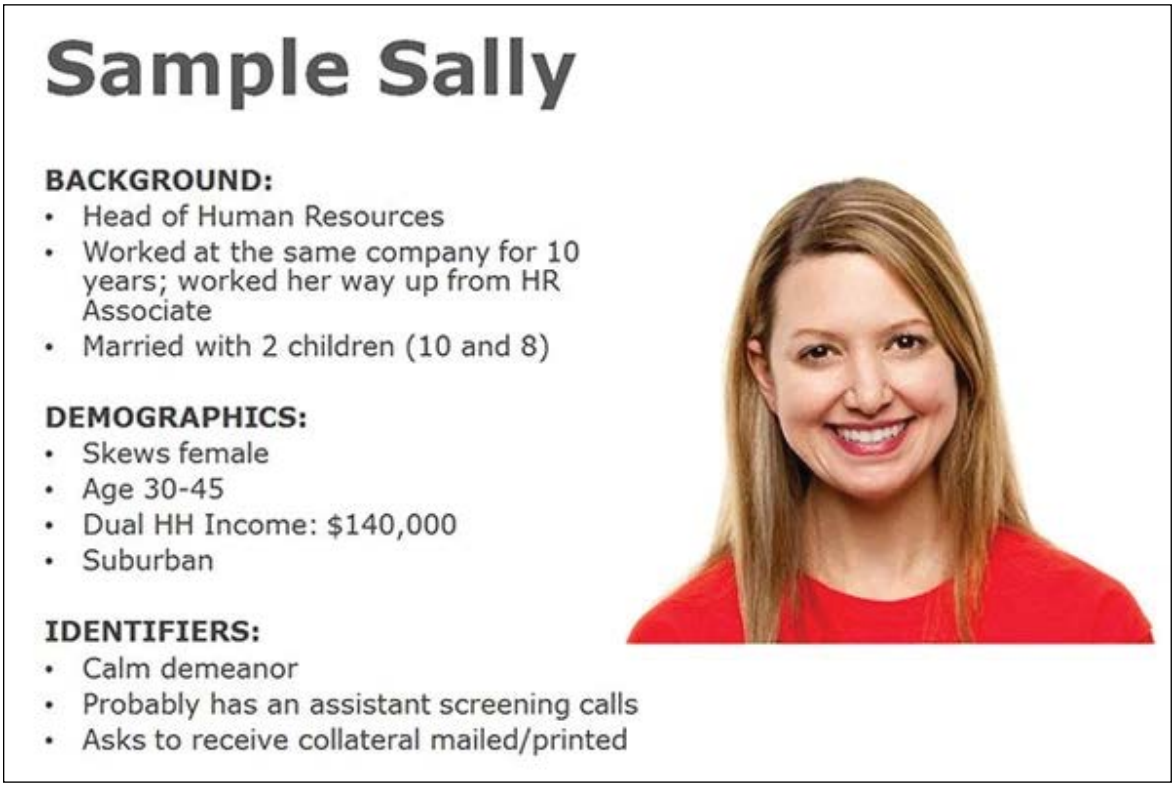
Sample Sally
BACKGROUND:
• Head of Human Resources
• Worked at the same company for 10 years; worked her way up from HR Associate
• Married with 2 children (10 and 8)
DEMOGRAPHICS:
• Skews female
• Age 30-45
• Dual HH Income: $140,000
• Suburban
IDENTIFIERS:
• Calm demeanor
• Probably has an assistant screening calls
• Asks to receive collateral mailed/printed

Figure 1. Example persona. Source: Lauren Ufford. 2017. "Know Your Customers: How to Build Buyer Personas for Your Retail Store." Shopify Retail Marketing Blog, 17 January 2017. https://www.shopify.com/retail/know-your-customers-how-to-build-buyer-personas-for-your-retail-store.

This column focuses on a broad range of practical academic issues from teaching and training to professional concerns, research, and technologies of interest to teachers, students, and researchers. Please send comments and suggestions to column editor Thomas Barker at *ttbarker@ualberta.ca.*

education, according to Higbee and Goff. Here's how they explain it:

> *Universal Design promotes the consideration of the needs of all potential users in the planning and development of a space, product, or program—an approach that is equally applicable to architecture or education. It also supports the notion that when providing an architectural feature—or an educational service, for that matter—to enhance accessibility and inclusion for one population, we are often benefiting all occupants or participants.*

The "one population" in the quote above refers to the world of disability services. These are services for the visual-, hearing-, and mobility-impaired community. Persons with special limitations (or gifts) point us—designers, writers, marketers—toward solutions for people without those limitations and gifts.

Higbee and Goff explain persona magic in this way:

> *One of the most often cited examples is the curb cut, which is used by people on roller blades or skateboards, parents pushing strollers, travelers hauling luggage, people making deliveries with hand carts, and others, as well as by people with disabilities. Similarly, many people benefit from the provision of automatic doors, elevators, door handles instead of knobs, and so on.*

The roots of this idea of the curious general utility from specific design come from design theories in psychology. Not only can personas lead to great design, they *look* human, and their "presence" as interesting people helps create a communicative bond among the design team members.

One thing you find in scholarship subsequent to Cooper, as in the work of John Carroll, is the term "scenario." In writings about design, *scenario* has come to mean a set of consequential actions, steps for using something, including a cast of characters. The concept of scenario, I argue, is prevalent in persona theory. I submit as evidence an early—and very neglected—paper on scenarios that "had it right" long before the term *persona* was in common use.

The Then

Linda S. Flower, John R. Hayse, and Heidi Swarts tried something very unusual in the late 1970s when they designed their research study:

- They wanted to study the readers' experience, not grammar—what actual behaviors do readers show when faced with a desert of definitions and a tangle of cross references (for example, "See section 8c, part b")?
- They looked at *functional documents in the workplace* (instructions, proposals, reports) and used talk-aloud protocol analysis to determine how readers make sense of deadly, dense prose.
- They *studied revision* and how readers "revise" in their heads to make sense by asking readers to talk aloud while reading. (Genius!)

The study resulted in a principle: the scenario.

> *We hoped that this research would suggest a practical, powerful principle for revising Federal regulations and, by implication, other functional documents. And indeed it did. We call this principle the "scenario principle," which states that functional prose should be structured around a* human agent *performing* actions *in a particularized* situation.

Note that this work reflects the time when it was first published, and we should remember that a publication date of 1980 meant that the work might have started up to two years earlier. Indeed, the piece reflects the time: the emphasis on readability formulas like the Flesch Index, the Writers' Workbench, and other tools used in government and still in vogue in technical writing. The act of revision was also a popular focus in technical writing instruction at

Table 3. Critical Differences Between Old and Revised Documents

Kind of Document	*Writers' Goal*	*Strategy*	*Example*	*Consequence*
Old Documents	To Teach Information	Develop a Concept-Centered Network	Focus on "Eligibility"	A Definition
Revised Documents	To Help the Reader Act	Develop a Human-Centered Network	Focus on "the Borrower"	A Scenario

Figure 2. Comparisons between old and new—or newly revised—documents.

the time, whereas now the focus is more on readers' processing.

These reflections of the time, however, are not the real brilliance in this article. The brilliance, I argue, comes from what the researchers found. When they recorded people talking about how they plodded through dry loan requirements, these perceptive researchers noticed that readers took *descriptions* and turned them into *stories*. For example, where the text defined what qualified as a "print service" (ownership and independence from the borrower), the reader revised it in terms of everyday actions. It's the kind of shop where you "have something that you need printed, you bring it in, they print it up."

The Power of Stories

Turning something into a story, it turns out, is one way that readers revise dense prose in their minds. They don't just replace big words with little ones or develop meanings as a whole. They personalize it—give it an actor, action, and goal or outcome. They create real, concrete imaginary situations based on tasks. From this idea, the authors spin out a number of comparisons between old and new—or newly revised—documents, all deriving from the fundamental polarity of describe/act, dehumanized action to engaged actors, and so on, as shown in Figure 2.

The authors describe their discovery in terms of the kinds of associations made (that is, dots connected) by their "talk-aloud" readers. They observe that the old version of the documents was "designed to create a network of information centered around concepts and key terms." They follow up by saying:

> *The revised regulations, on the other hand, try to create a human-centered network of information focused on human agents and their actions, such as borrowers who live in the United States and promise to repay loans; it is this strategy which we have been calling the scenario principle.*

Conclusion

Today, we're all about stories. In research, for example, participative modes have led to storytelling as a way of knowledge making. Stories have the power to evoke, to stir, to affect, to motivate—a power that is extensively exploited in the data-rich world of social media advertising. Stories are magic, and how that magic works is illustrated by the "then and now" of these two articles: that a specific story—about me, my origins, my work goals—fits in a story, in a scene with people in it. The story of people with disabilities gives us insights into all of our workplaces, showing how they can be improved for all.

Those gems from the shelf show us a lot about our origins from our literature and scholarly conversations of ideas about people. They speak from the past about writing, technical communication, and ways to bring a human focus to functional information.

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Technical Communication: The Ultimate Pivot Role for Intelligent Customer Experience (ICX)

BY CRUCE SAUNDERS

EACH OF US in technical communication has tremendous career options and opportunities before us that didn't exist a decade ago. For years, technical communicators have built expertise in the skills that will drive the digital future: structured authoring, modular content design, content strategy, taxonomy, context-based content variation, multichannel publishing, content portability, and various engineering disciplines. As a result, after analyzing thousands of resumes in the space, we at [A] foresee technical communication as the logical pivot point to carry enterprises into next-generation customer experience (CX). The near-future of customer experience—and for many, the present—requires an object-oriented approach to organizing and assembling content as reusable objects rather than hard-coded, unstructured blobs.

Intelligent Customer Experience

Every day, publishing teams across the enterprise stretch content creation and management in new directions. Multiple touchpoints on today's dynamic customer journeys have nudged us toward intelligent content and omnichannel production. Enterprises face pressure to generate more flexible customer experiences that assemble content in response to a customer's changing context. We call this intelligent customer experience (ICX).

Customer journeys can start and transition to almost any touch point of customer-facing content. A purchase decision may start with voice assistance while walking, jump to a product video viewed on a smartphone at Starbucks, and continue with a brief session exploring customer reviews and support documentation on a tablet or laptop in the workplace. The customer interacts with a dazzling array of content types and channels as they interact with our organizations.

To survive and thrive in this new marketplace, we must shape our content and roles in totally new ways. We make content flexible enough to achieve real-time content personalization, which remains for most a still-distant objective.

Enterprise publishers deliver personalized journeys—not only through advanced tools and AI features but by transforming "chunky" content management into fluid customer experience management. This requires engineering the content itself and leans on the skills technical communicators have been building for decades.

Next-generation CX requires an expansive set of skills and instincts, from active management of content structure and semantics to applying strategic and engineering thinking to content. Technical communicators have been exercising many of the skills (especially structured authoring) for years, and technical communication is the logical pivot point to help create the future. Each technical communication professional has tremendous career opportunities that didn't exist a decade ago.

Technical Communicators Blaze the Trail

Here at [A], we work with some of the largest and most complex publishers on earth, including many in the Fortune 50. Our clients work with content supply chains that cover various content sets, including marketing, technical communication, support, and in-product experiences, to name a few—and since the advent of smartphones and conversational assistants, we've had to adapt to ever-changing channels of communication within our marketplace.

Publishers face many challenges creating a new operating model and orchestration approach for dynamic omnichannel content. This column addresses the changing content ecosystem and the evolving dynamics in the space. Questions, suggestions, or feedback? Email *editorial@simplea.com*.

Wherever we view content within an organization, we see the same challenges—except technical communicators are ahead of

the game. Critical next-generation experiences come out of this interplay between technology and communication that technical communicators have been navigating for several years, as shown in Figure 1.

Connecting Humans and Machines Together

Technology has become the intermediary by which we experience most transactions with a company, including pre-sales and post-sales. *Technical communicators connect communication between humans and machines.*

For years, many in technical communication have been structuring documents—be it with home-grown XML, DITA, or semistructured approaches, such as Word and Markdown formats. Everyone in technical communication understands the importance of tags and other associative metadata, and many of the so-called documents that we author are actually snippets and parts that become components in *assembled experiences,* which come together from disparate sources. Because subdocument-level content is delivered to many different places, technical communication is leading the way due to the industry's earned experience in omnichannel delivery over the past two decades. Many other departments within enterprises are still creating and managing content as unstructured "blobs" that are managed on a file-by-file basis.

Pathways Beyond Documentation

All of the disciplines and pathways we illustrate in Figure 2 are best coordinated under a content services organization (CSO), which is an orchestration layer for the application of standards and workflow among different authoring groups, including technical communication. We must standardize content creation and delivery to dynamically reach more people in more places. A content services organization involves a lot of *new* roles that are beyond documentation and marketing but are still within the realm of technical communication.

Figure 2 shows the many paths beyond traditional documentation that are now available to technical communicators who are ready to move into next-generation CX. These destinations are based on employment history that [A] derived from resumés. These paths all represent real people in the marketplace who have applied for a position in content engineering at [A] or whom we have screened when helping clients staff their new content services organization.

From [A]'s experience, technical communicators are finding

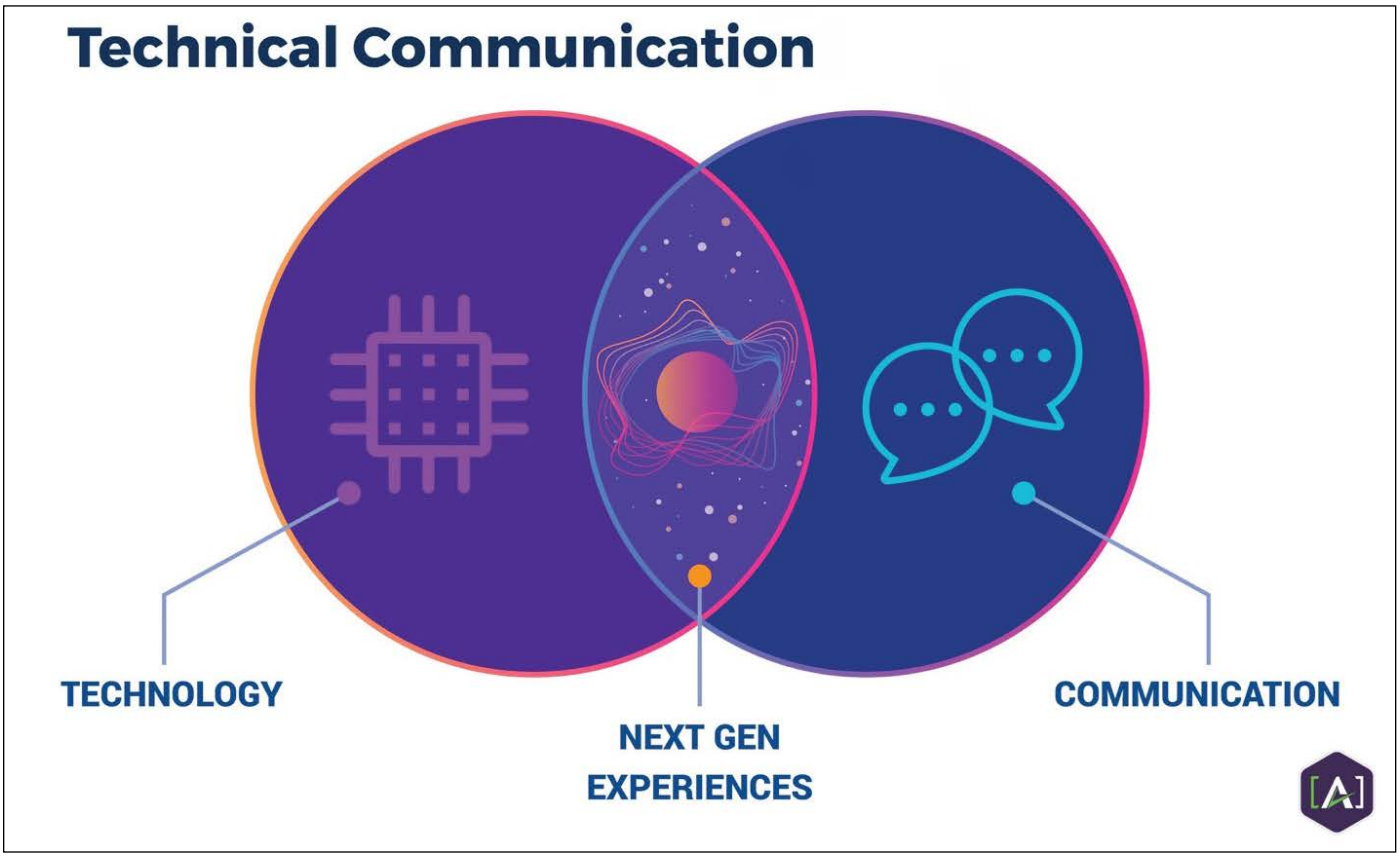

Figure 1. Next-generation customer experiences come out of the interplay between technology and communication.

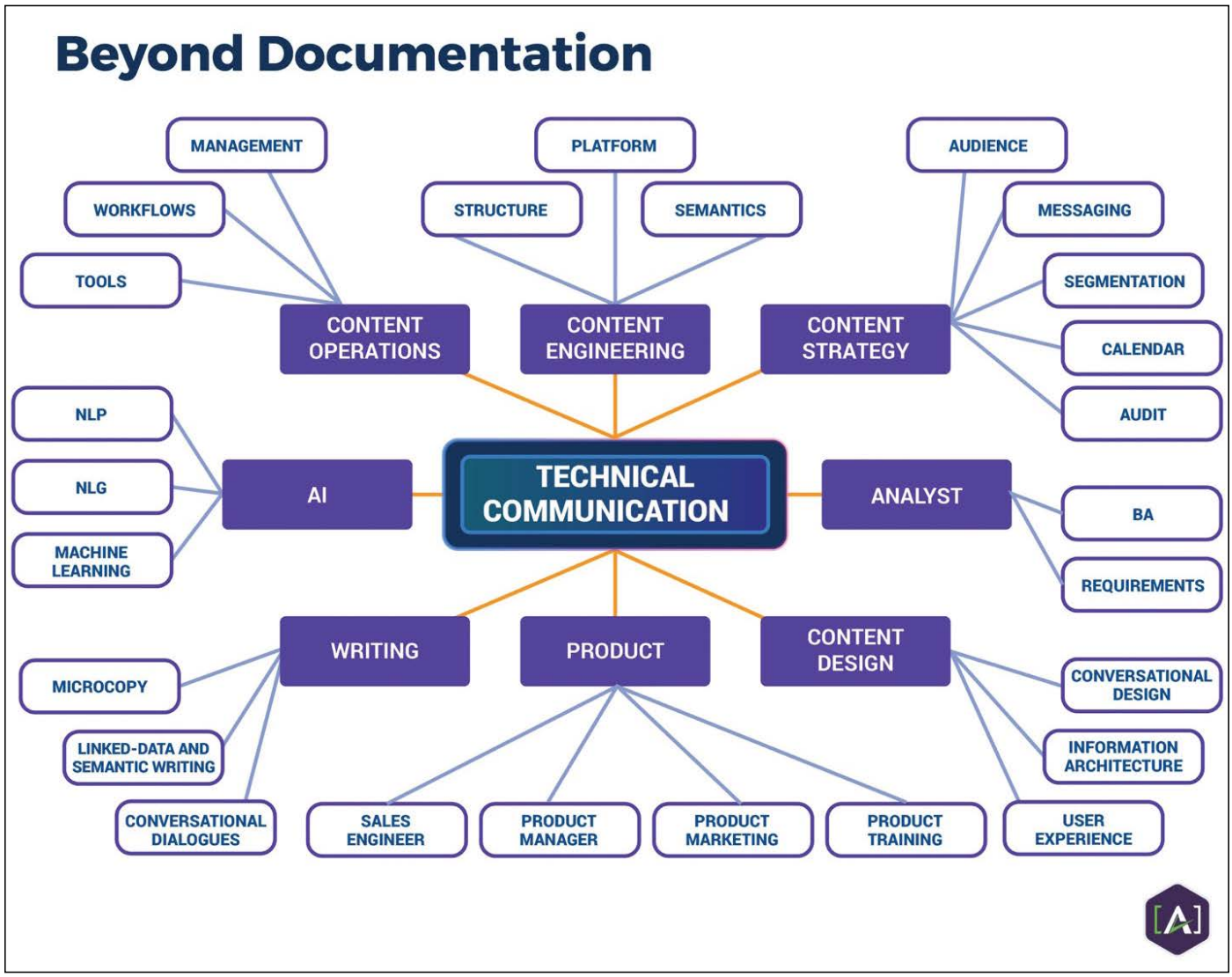

Figure 2. CX career paths beyond documentation that are available to technical communicators.

futures in expanded career tracks, including:

- **Content operations:** tools, workflows, and management
- **Content engineering:** structure, platform, and semantics
- **Content strategy:** audience, messaging, segmentation, calendar, and audit
- **Analyst:** BA and requirements
- **Content design:** conversational design, information architecture, and user experience
- **Product:** sales engineer, product manager, product marketing, and product training
- **New forms of writing:** microcopy, linked data and semantic writing, and conversational dialogues
- **Artificial intelligence (AI):** natural language processing (NLP), natural-language generation (NLG), and machine learning

Here's a closer look at some of these practices through the lens of content operations, content strategy, and content engineering. Together, they enable the bridge-building required in most organizations to free content from silos and render it more fluid.

Content Operations

Content operations is how an organization performs day-to-day management of content. It's a chartered, permanent, cross-functional organization that contains functions that orchestrate and interact with various distributed authoring groups, along with various stakeholder groups like communities of practice, councils, and committees. For many organizations, this is still an aspirational goal. It's challenging to persuade somebody to manage content at a structural level on an ongoing basis with a broad purview over interoperable content sets. Technical communicators have the ability to think in those terms of content operations, which helps define and wire together content workflows and tools.

Content Engineering

Content engineering is the application of an engineering discipline to the design, acquisition, management, delivery, and use of content and deployed technologies to support a full content lifecycle. The practice of content engineering is the content's technical owner—the "CTO" of content.

Structure

We need to be able to create variability by structuring content so it can be adapted to different user contexts through to different presentations.

Semantics

Semantics is the contextualization of our content structures. It defines the entities, associations, and relationships for a given piece of content, usually within metadata or a relational or graph database. Semantics is *how machines can understand content, connections, and relationships*. For example, semantics would determine how a piece of content can be associated with the segment it belongs to.

Content Strategy

The content strategist is the "CEO" of content, the role that directs the who, what, when, where, and why of content. In contrast, content engineers are focused on how content bridges gaps and connects to channels and customers. Content strategy also establishes a business justification for investments made in improving how content is handled and defines the metrics that will be used to measure progress against that plan. This strategic mindset will be familiar to many long-time technical communication professionals.

Embracing New Forms of Writing

Writing itself is taking on new forms all the time. One clear example is writing for *conversational interaction*. How can we prompt—based on customer response—the right suggested next step via a chatbot or voice interface? For most, that was not even on our radar a decade ago. How do we write short, action-oriented responses for given intents? How can we bridge that short-text form with traditional documentation?

What is old, however, is new again. Intent and response interactions are very familiar to technical communication professionals. Documentation authors know all about providing users with a series of ordered tasks in response to an error state and based on the telemetry of a software application. Conversational interaction scripts are just introducing new containers, writing, and markup approaches to the kind of user-education work that technical writers have been doing since the dawn of the interface.

Interfaces are now moving toward some form of personalization—some form of contextual-based content that is delivered in response to metadata triggers. Thus, even if we remain within the writing side of technical communication, there are many new and interesting opportunities.

For the most technically minded and those familiar with structured content authoring, there are some really compelling career paths that involve designing ontologies and making content sets available for AI, working with NLP, NLG, and predictive forms of machine learning—extending where *language* meets *technology*. Making content meet intelligent systems is a journey the whole market is on, and many more leaders are needed.

Gaining the Experience and Skills to Move Forward

To achieve career success in this expanded array of services, we need structured authoring experience. If we don't have that first, we're not "there yet" in terms of a foundation for next-gen solutions. We also need to gain skills and experience in eliciting clear definitions within business requirements, and we need experience generating modular presentations—this is essential for gaining funding support for a content services organization from budget stakeholders.

It also helps to learn about object-oriented thinking if we don't have that in our repertoire. An object-oriented approach to organizing content requires reusable objects rather than hard-coded unstructured blobs. It enables content containers to be pointed to and from anywhere, manipulated, transformed, annotated, reused, and managed from a central location. Metadata is essential to this process.

Technical communicators need to be object-oriented thinkers and to be able to spread that DNA to other parts of the organization. Be proud of having a technical communication background. It's a superpower, indeed. Let's get to work making publishing smarter!

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Editor's note: *Jack's poignant* Off Hours *experience reminds us all that for many, "when I'm not working" is synonymous with "family," "friends," and "community." In other words, just* being *with people rather than manically* doing. *We think of our off hours as time for hobbies to bring relaxation and rejuvenation. Especially in these pandemic times, connection has become more precious and supportive of reducing stress, relaxing, and rejuvenating. Consider not only the impact others have on you when you connect but also the impact you are having on them. Thank you, Jack, for bringing us that reminder.*

What Goes Around Comes Around

BY JACK MOLISANI | *STC Fellow*

I GREW UP in Jacksonville Beach, Florida, and moved back there five years ago to help my aging parents. My mom developed dementia, so we moved her into a brand new, top-notch, memory care facility that opened two blocks from my apartment, exactly one month before we needed it. (Coincidence?)

A few months later, I flew to New Orleans on a business trip just as a Category 5 hurricane formed off the coast of Florida. I considered flying back to Jacksonville—if I could even get a flight—but then I'd just have to turn around and evacuate again. What to do?

Mom's facility was just two blocks from the beach, in a mandatory evacuation zone. I knew the facility had a hurricane evacuation plan (I had asked in our first meeting). They had a sister facility farther inland, with the exact same floorplan, backup generators, the works. They would evacuate my mom, but since they were doubling up in the sleeping rooms, they'd need something for her to sleep on.

Amazon Prime to the rescue!

There was no way I was going to have my mom sleep on a blow-up mattress on the floor, so I found a queen-sized camping mattress, which stood about three feet off the ground when set up, and two D-size batteries inflated the mattress. Perfect! Amazon delivered it the next morning.

I am happy to report the evacuation to the other facility and back went perfectly. Mom loves road trips, and since the second facility was an exact duplicate of her own, I don't think she even realize she was evacuated! (Although the other residents *did* want to know why Miss Gloria had a bed and they had to sleep on a blow-up mattress on the floor!)

I flew back to Jacksonville as soon as the storm passed. No damage to my car at the airport, no damage to my mom's facility, no damage to my apartment—although a huge oak tree fell, missing my roof by inches. My landlady said angels must have guided the tree away from my apartment. I agreed.

My Aunt Cyd lives in St. Augustine, about an hour south of Jacksonville. She lives in a wooded neighborhood, and her home took some damage in the storm. I tried to round up some friends and family to help, but everyone was busy fixing their own family homes, so I decided to go alone and do what I could.

Half way between Jacksonville Beach and St. Augustine is about 30 miles of national wetlands and wildlife reserve. As I'm driving past the reserve, I saw a man and a woman hiking along the road, literally in the middle of nowhere. I pulled over and offered them a ride. We made introductions, and I discovered they just left a homeless shelter in Jax Beach and were on their way to Tampa, Forida, where they had family. An idea hit and I asked them, "How would you like a job today?" They said, "We'd *love* a job today!"

I called my Aunt Cyd to see if she was OK with that, and she said, "Sure!" So, I stopped at the McDonald's in St. Augustine, bought us all bacon and egg muffins, and we made our way to my aunt's house.

They were a godsend! The gentleman helped me clear the road of debris, cut fallen tree limbs, mowed the yard, fixed her fence, and took down the storm shutters. The lady cleaned the leaves out of the pool, swept the deck, swept the drive, and flushed leaves out of the rain gutters. My aunt made us all lunch, and the couple got to take hot showers and do a load of laundry. When we were done, I gave each of them $100 and dropped them off at a reasonably priced motel. They thanked me profusely and said, "We get to sleep in a real bed tonight!"

They thanked *me*, yet it was I who was grateful. There was absolutely no way I could have done all that work by myself.

For the record: I have *never* seen hitchhikers on that stretch of A1A, let alone have I ever stopped to pick up any. Yet there I was, desperate for some extra hands to help clear my aunt's house from the hurricane damage, when God? Karma? Fate? puts two people walking on the side of the road, exactly when I needed them, who needed some work, a meal, clean clothes, and money for a hotel.

Funny, that was years ago, and I'm tearing up (and smiling) as I write this. There is much—and there are many—to be thankful for. I have proof!

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